

UTOPAI

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Utopai

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Utopai

To my mother and father

Utopai

Thank You

Soumya - For believing in me

NaliniMoothamma - The greatest aunt ever, and my basis
for the book

Surendrelechan - Whose predictions changed everything

and

Gowri - For your patience

CHAPTER ONE

Unhinged

The following is, *ahem*, an accurate history of an individual with the given name of Alonso, whose surname I dare not divulge, in fear of chastisement from you all. Lest you castigate me for sullying the name of a famous celebrity, let me assure you, my dear reader, that any resemblance of this gentleman to any character you have read about before is absolutely coincidental.

Now that the formalities are done with, let me give you all a brief picture of our hero. Currently on his fiftieth trip around the sun, his birth year easily calculated then as 36 AS, or rather, 2062 AD in old parlance, he was an unmarried, gentle and genial soul, not much into merriment or alternate reality, and the favorite uncle amongst his nieces and nephews. Since middle aged bachelors are given big apartments and bigger allowances, he always had one or the other relatives living with him, an arrangement he rather enjoyed, as it allowed him an escape from the monotony of a tepid life.

One thing everyone in Utopai had at their disposal was time, and our hero spent it reading books on success, on achievements, reading so much, and with such fervent interest, he was verily spending most of his allowance on buying these books to read. This concept of success took his fancy so much so that, moving from novels to biographies and then on to self-help books, he spent most of his hours on it, dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn, reading to such a degree that slowly his mind started to turn.

Any time not reading, he now spent day dreaming, dreaming about success, success at varied levels and varied ways. Sometimes he was the CEO, ordering and strutting about, born to lead, born with a silver spoon in his mouth. Other times, he was a middle level manager in an MNC, plotting his ascent up the corporate ladder. Depending on the book he read, he might one day fantasize about being rich and powerful, or on another day, as an altruist working for a higher cause. Mostly though, he pictured himself either as a backstabbing opportunist or as a hard working family man, vicariously living different lives in his mind, going deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole, enjoying these dreams more than his life itself.

His dreams so vivid, his imagination so fertile, his mind so caught up, instead of recognizing these books as what they really are, as just fantasies which has no grounding in reality, he started believing in them, considering them as part of his current reality itself.

So deep was the influence of these books, he then had the most unusual thought anyone ever had, that he was going to somehow stand out from the crowd, become rich and famous, and gain respect from his fellow men, and he is going to do it by working hard, taking risks, seeking and grabbing opportunities, basically by doing everything he read in these fantasies.

As the first step towards this goal, he decided to change his name. Amongst the books he read were research papers which showed that a simple, strong and powerful name automatically brings in respect and attention. After a lot of soul searching, he at last decided to call himself Don Alonso, a name simple and strong, a name which commands immediate attention, a name, if nothing else, will help him start his life anew.

After this, Don Alonso decided that he no longer wanted any guidance from Dina. A decision which was an absolute surprise for everyone around him — disconnecting the supporting AI system, especially when one is starting on such an arduous quest, was something rather difficult to understand. The next decision, to remove the Lethe dispenser implant, drew far less condemnation though — if one wants to be successful, it is better to get rid of a system which resets your engine, obviously.

The next step was to convince Sancho to join him.

CHAPTER TWO

Recruitment

Sancho was dozing on his easy chair when Dina woke him up — Don Alonso has started from his apartment and will reach in about ten minutes. He got up, freshened himself, and was just coming out of his bath when he saw Don Alonso exiting the lift.

He welcomed his dear friend in, and as both of them settled around a cup of coffee, he also switched off Dina, knowing his neighbor's eccentricities all too well.

"Did you make a decision, Sancho?", asked Don Alonso, after a brief chit-chat.

"I have been thinking, Senor", said Sancho, "and there are few points where I am quite confused. What you told me about the lack of meaning in our lives — I think that is true, I see no meaning whatsoever. That said, your actual point there, that there is no happiness in our lives — I am not sure about that, Senor. When I look back, I feel I am quite happy and content. I have my monthly allowance

which means I can buy whatever I want, every month. I have my Lethe, so I can enjoy every single thing to the absolute maximum. I live in the best of apartments with the best of amenities, I have never been sad, I haven't had any worries till now, what more would I want in life, Don Alonso?"

"The happiness you are talking about is a bit shallow, Sancho. Real happiness is arrived at when you achieve it through your individual capability and hard work, not when things are given to you in a platter. As you grow up, isn't your happiness in getting praised rather higher than, say, getting a birthday present? This is just the same, in a different setting. That is not all, there is an even bigger problem there, and that is the level of control that we have on our lives, Sancho. What happens if suddenly one day they stop our allowance? Have you thought about that? If we can't look after ourselves, we will be in quite a trouble if they decide to do something like that, if things stop being so hunky-dory. There is nothing that is absolutely safe, true, but when you provide no value, the risk is far higher, isn't it?"

"Oh! Can they do that?", Sancho had never thought this before, "I hope they don't do that. It will be an absolute disaster — the whole of Utopai will break apart then, wouldn't it?"

"It hasn't happened yet, true, but it is something I really worry about. I will sleep a lot better if I know that I am a required member of the society, that keeping me is to the

societies benefit. And this is the same reason behind my quest for self-sufficiency, this same worry everywhere. Anyways, this is just one side of the problem, Sancho. The real issue — I am coming back to my original point here — don't you feel that you are missing something? Life needs some purpose, some meaning, and I think we really miss that here. There is no real satisfaction, we don't understand real emotions, all our relations are superficial, in a way, we live like cooped up chickens, never realizing how immensely rewarding life can be, a life unrealized and unfulfilled."

"Emotions are all there, Senor. Just last week I had such a fright..."

"You can't count those, Sancho. However immersive these alternate reality games are, however frightened, spirited and euphoric you are inside it, don't we still know, in the back of our mind, that we are safe and sound and nothing really has changed? We don't understand real emotions — we don't understand what mortal terror means, what absolute panic or deep grief is, we don't understand rage, absolute seething rage, nor do we understand envy, real envy, that horrible, horrible feeling eating you from within, even happiness, real euphoria or absolute fulfilment, we have no idea Sancho, everything that we have are manufactured, factory fed emotions, pale imitations which has very little in relation to reality. We live in mile high condominiums, wait for our allowances every month, eat food brought to us from factories, spend our time in games and entertainment, and when our time

comes, we die. This is not life, Sancho. Can't you see it? There has to be a lot more to it, and we are missing all that, for sure."

"Oh! I get it now, Senor. We do nothing of importance, our lives go by without changing anything, a life inconsequential, right?"

"I would rather call it a life lacking meaning, Sancho. It is not about making big changes in the world, but when a single misstep can send your life tumbling from comfort to poverty, what you do becomes important automatically, and your life gains meaning out of that. This same meaning is what I am also looking for, through this quest for success and achievement, a life where we understand the happiness of winning, the pain of losing, the seduction of power, the bile of envy, I want the meaning found in a life real, I want real satisfaction, of hard work and self-sufficiency, of respect and worthiness. We might not be successful, Sancho, but it will be a journey worth taking, worth taking only because we might fail, do you understand now, are you in for it?"

Sancho, completely floored, decided to join the quest straightaway. Don Alonso wasn't too keen on sudden decisions though, to avoid the risk of regrets later. He asked Sancho to take it easy, talk to everyone, wait it out a week before he commits to any decision. Once he commits though, he has to take it to the end, and not leave it half-way. After these discussions Don Alonso left, and now it was Sancho's turn to dream, dream about success, dream

Utopai

about power, pleasant fantasies, loving every moment of
it.

CHAPTER THREE

Preparations

There was no change in Sancho's decision even after a week, so Don Alonso started explaining to Sancho his plans and ideas.

"Success can mean many things, but mostly, it is about making money, Sancho. Start a business, become rich, and people automatically will consider you successful. Money is where the real power is, and that is what we should focus on."

"Business? Money? Don Alonso?"

Sancho didn't understand any of it, and teaching him was quite an effort. While the concept of money was easily understood — after all, allowance *was* money — making Sancho grok the concept of business was an altogether different proposition. Even the very basics of economic concepts like laissez-faire and invisible hand was alien to him, the level of his allowance meant he had only a vague notion of marginal utility, so to teach him how to make

money, by innovations or incremental improvements, or by plain old retail business, was a difficult task indeed, and Don Alonso was dead tired by the end of the session. Sancho was an excellent student though, so it wasn't all bad, and Don Alonso was pleasantly surprised by the sharpness of his student beneath all the drollery.

Now that Sancho was up-to-date on the basics of economics, the discussion turned to the actual plans of Don Alonso. There were two, a somewhat risky primary plan, which he has been working on for about five years now, and a backup plan, for safety. The main plan has hit a road block sometime back, so he is now thinking about the backup plan, which absolutely should work, just that it is a lot more effort intensive, that's why the need of a partner, and while the profit margin for the backup scheme is on the lower side, it is still good money, and they were going to be rich, regardless.

Don Alonso then explained about his primary plan. He would invent something, then make a business out of that invention. He has done quite a bit of preparation for it, actually. Since an inventor is one who connects different dots, he started learning about anything and everything, and on finding the information vast and time less, he did a level 4 brain mapping, and now he has a pretty good understanding of all the hard sciences, technological breakthroughs, comics and literature, pretty much everything required for an inventor. All the information crammed to his head in a two year period — two years on, he still gets headaches in the morning.

The plan went awry though. Even with all these preparations, Don Alonso couldn't come up with any undiscovered ideas. More than two years he has been trying, spending up to twelve hours daily, doing nothing but thinking, connecting different ideas, bringing in random connections, but at no point could he come up with anything not available in the network. And it is not as if he wasn't getting ideas — he was getting them, five, ten, daily, from the simplest to the most complicated, but check in the network, it will be there, somewhere.

He wasn't one easily discouraged — maybe it is just that the initial ideas were all low hanging fruits, maybe the ideas will get better over time. But when he couldn't get anything new even after going deep into specific areas, even after spending two years on it, he started having doubts, doubts about the basic veracity of the plan itself. He was originally of the view that ideas are dime a dozen, and the only trouble he will have would be in choosing the best idea and in converting it to a viable business, but maybe it isn't true, maybe his whole plan is built on shaky foundations. So, Sancho, here he is, with the backup plan, don't worry about the failure of first one, if they keep on trying, success is an absolute surety.

Sancho sat there, mouth open in amazement. He knew Don Alonso was trying something, everyone knew that, but the amount of work he has put in, that was an absolute shock to Sancho. He cared naught the results of the plan, what's important was the work done and the risks taken

— level 4 mapping, wow!, unbelievable. Admiration welled up inside him, and he told Don Alonso this.

These compliments came as an absolute surprise to Don Alonso. He was worried that the first plan's failure might cause Sancho to look down upon him, and here he was instead singing his paeans, being in complete awe and wonderment. These were heady feelings, glorious and lovely, these heartfelt praises nothing like the empty platitudes regularly doled out by Dina, the happiness at a different level, Don Alonso felt his face reddening with pleasure, tears welling up in his eyes, and for the first time he regretted not taking Lethe, the next time will never be this good, never near the first time.

"It is worth it, Sancho, regardless of the result", said Don Alonso, "I see the world now in a completely different light, I now know how everything fits together, my life now has some purpose, some meaning; that alone is worth every bit of the effort, isn't it? Actually, this gives me an idea, Sancho, why don't you also try to come up with an idea? If you can get something new and good — a fresh mind can really help — then maybe we can use it for our business, and continue with our primary plan itself. And if it is already there in the network, nothing is lost anyways, and furthermore, you will understand what others want, how to solve problems, concepts important for any type of business. What do you say, Sancho, want to give it a go?"

Sancho was positively horrified at this prospect. Don

Alonso, with all these preparations couldn't do it — then how can he, he who hasn't read a single book all his life, he who hasn't heard what inventions are until today, come up with anything, let alone something substantial?

"That is what gives you the edge, Sancho", said Don Alonso, "Your thought process would be so different from that of the others, you might just be the person to come up with something new, actually. Just try it out for, say, a month, and if you can't get anything by then, don't worry, it is just the last roll of the dice anyways, right?"

"Still, Senor, how can I come up with anything in a month? Can I ask Dina, at least?"

"No, no, don't do that. Every time you ask her anything, you become more and more dependent on her, Sancho. You and her are so connected now, you both act as a combined organism, she adapting to you, you adapting to her, identities so commingled, you don't know whether the answer is your decision or hers. And it is not just ego talking, Sancho. Every time you try to solve a problem yourself, you get a hundred smaller learnings in that process, learnings which help you in your future decisions. When you outsource decisions to Dina, you are missing all of that. You get your one correct solution, true, but you miss out on the ninety-nine mistakes which you shouldn't do, ninety-nine scenarios where you will need to take help from Dina again. From a long term perspective, Sancho, it is better not to rely on Dina at all, if you want to see farther, think harder and understand more. And if we

live our lives without understanding how the world works, we cannot hope to break these shackles of Dina, we cannot hope to become successful, independent people. You try, Sancho, try it out alone, don't worry about the results, just try."

It required a bit more cajoling, and at last, Sancho agreed. The only problem was, he had no idea how to start. If Don Alonso could help him out there, show him how to come up with new ideas, then there is no problem, he can try it out for sure.

"Invention is just connecting two unrelated ideas together, Sancho", said Don Alonso, "Take our ankle socks for example. These were made of pure cotton initially, no wire inlays or anything, but then someone linked the concept of seat belts to it. So, like seat belts getting stuck when you pull hard, or like bike wheels which stops swivel at speed based thresholds, someone made sure that the socks also stops twisting at a threshold, and what you get then are these safety socks, which prevents spraining of ankles. By connecting two unrelated ideas, you get a completely new idea, unique and useful. Try this method out for a month or so, Sancho, connect random thoughts and see, by then I will also start on the backup plan, and once you are back, we can decide what to do next."

Sancho took leave of Don Alonso, his head still a bit reeling from this new development. Don Alonso was also quite preoccupied, his mind now working on the backup

plan, the ways to approach it, the steps to take, planning, deciding.

The primary plan, as far as he was concerned, was over. If Sancho can come up with a new idea, well and good, but the probability of that isn't great. Chances are, there are no further ideas at all remaining, all ideas accounted for already. When a dozen billion people has nothing to do but think, there will be precious little remaining, after all.

A bittersweet smile escaped his lips. That plan was the easy way out. No wonder everyone chose that exact same route. Now he has to move to the backup plan, and it was proper business — finding inefficiencies in the system and using it to his advantage. Tedious work, to find mismatches between the cost of an item and the price of it, a sign usually of hidden inefficiencies. Still, it should work — he hasn't seen a lot of competing products in the aisles, which should mean a high chance of inefficiencies.

By the time Sancho comes back, he will be ready with the preliminary list — products having the maximum difference between its price and the cost of raw materials. The difficult work starts then, going through each of them, finding out the internal inefficiencies, deciding which inefficiency to target. Difficult, tiring, work, Sancho is absolutely required by then, but now, he will at least get this initial list up and running.

CHAPTER FOUR

Decisions

It was about three weeks before they met again — so engrossed were they in their individual tasks. Sancho, getting an idea at last, burst into Don Alonso's condo, all excited and happy. His friend wasn't in the best of moods though, having faced a lot of problems with the backup plan.

"Give me some good news, Sancho", said Don Alonso, "I am in serious trouble, and all hopes now rest only on your idea."

"It is related to the flow of traffic, Don Alonso, so I don't know how to make money out of it, to tell the truth. That I thought we can decide later, after we thrash out the details. It is a very simple concept, about the efficiency of our traffic flow. Since we all drive on the left side of the road, I was thinking that it is not very efficient to turn right at junctions, because it would slow down the traffic. Instead of normal junctions, suppose there were only left turns, and U-turns further ahead for vehicles wanting to

go right, wouldn't it make everything go faster, because there are no intersecting movements and everyone flows in the same direction? I think this idea is not an existing one, Senor, since there are intersecting junctions everywhere. How do you like this concept, Don Alonso? Do you think we can make money out of this?"

"Sorry, Sancho, it is an age old idea, already discovered a long time ago.", said Don Alonso. He was feeling quite bad to break the bubble of his friend, as sad as he was when his own initial ideas were found to be existing. "You don't see it now because all vehicles nowadays talk to each other and advance or retreat based on that, so there is no efficiency to be gained by having such intersections. Don't be sad, my friend, I also was in this same situation, all ideas I come up with already there in the network, every single time. And there is an even bigger bad news waiting, Sancho. The backup plan I was working on, it looks a complete dud now, an absolute mess."

Don Alonso then explained to Sancho about the backup plan — about taking advantage of the internal inefficiencies of other companies, and how he was calculating it by comparing cost and price.

"And here I am stuck now. I have no idea how, but the price of every item is exactly the cost of its raw materials plus tax. I have been checking and rechecking, day and night, for the last few weeks. It is the same for every product, every single item. I have been pulling my hair out on this, actually."

“I am not getting it, Senor. Price and cost turning out to be same, is that an issue?”

“Don’t you see the problem, Sancho? Where are the profits then? Leave profits — where are the other costs? Where are the costs incurred for logistics, capital or research? Where are the labor costs or the cost of maintaining the systems? There is none of it here. Even the volume costs are no different. How does these companies survive? How can I start a company in such a setup and make any money? I don’t understand, Sancho. I don’t understand what is happening in the world. Howsoever I slice and dice it, it doesn’t make any sense.”

“What do we do then, Senor? Ditch everything?”

“No, no, Sancho. We have just touched the tip of the iceberg — there are so many options still open, mining or farming or services or what not, lot of ways money can still be made. These are just temporary setbacks, caused by our misconceptions, because we don’t understand the real world, because we don’t understand the intricacies. I think we should travel, Sancho. We should go out to the world, understand how things are done, we should network, network with the decision-makers, we should understand what people want, understand *their* desires and *our* competencies, and only then we should make our further plans.”

Sancho was not initially convinced, but Don Alonso

was able to bring him around in due time. Thus they decided on their third sally, after the failure of their first two enterprises, Sancho all pumped up and ready, the only remaining sticking point was now the use of Lethe.

“No Lethe? My whole future happiness will be lost if I stop it, Don Alonso. Can you rethink that at least?”

“It is a hard decision, I know, but there is no other way, Sancho. Otherwise we will never grow up. Something brought in with so much fanfare, an absolute death-knell to our drug addiction problem — and it turns out to be an even bigger scourge, making children out of us all. Being a child is a wonderful thing, Sancho, but not when we are adults embarking on such an adventure. We will succeed only if we learn from our experiences, and for that you will have to stop Lethe, I am afraid there is no other option.”

“Why are you so against it, Don Alonso? It just resets our reward tolerances, so that our reward tolerance doesn’t get updated during our Lethe session. How will it affect our learning or growing up, Senor?”

“Why am I against it? The basic concept itself is faulty, Sancho, that’s why. Why do we take Lethe before anything good? So that our enjoyment of it is not diminished over time, right? That is the crux of the problem, right there. When the level of enjoyment stays undiminished, who will aspire for more? When every food is tasty, would you spend time experimenting with

different cuisines? When every droll is witty, will you make better jokes? When every song is lovely, would you still create better music? When everything lasts longer, and every feeling quite stronger, we will not try to grow, we will not spend our time and effort in improving our situation, rather, we will be happy with the average, no more than the yearning to do great things or try out new experiences. Isn't that one being a child, Sancho? Lethe had its uses, I am not denying that. It was a brilliant weapon when we were fighting drug addiction, a double whammy in a way, because not only did it allow one to get intoxicated with very less, it also removed further craving for the intoxicant, the reward and addiction circuitry skipped during this period altogether. That is where it should have stopped, but the usual usage creep meant that it then entered the mainstream as a mechanism to decrease crimes of passion — there is no happiness like the first experience, and if one can relive it again and again, when the risk is low and rewards high, who would ever take the next steps towards perdition? We should never have gone there though, because while it did decrease crime, once something like this enters the mainstream, it was inevitable that it would become the goto mechanism to improve our life happiness itself, stunting our growth, making children of us all. Now do you understand why I am against Lethe? We cannot afford something which decreases our appetite for success when we are going for such a journey, Sancho."

After an allocution this intense, Sancho had no option but to agree. He was quite sad to remove the dispenser,

knowing that he will never feel the same enjoyment ever again, still, Don Alonso's points were all valid, and there really was no alternative. The only pending decision was the date of their travel, and not wanting to wait too much, they decided to start next Wednesday itself.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Third Sally

On 20th night, Sancho arrived with his bags all packed and ready, the plan was to spend the night in the apartment of Don Alonso, and to start very early in the morning. While sleep was never a problem for Sancho, it was not to be so for Don Alonso. All the hopes and fears playing in his mind, excitement and worry in equal measure, Sancho's horrible snoring from the other room, all together meant a sleepless night for him, tossing and turning, waking up much earlier than he planned. He got ready straightaway, and after waking Sancho up, tiptoed out with their packed bags, trying not to wake Antonia from her sleep, and now onto to a new journey, amongst the twinkling stars, the light pattering of December snow, their third sally, a journey which will change their life forever.

This time, Don Alonso had eschewed all his usual preparations. He was wary of detailed plans after the failure of his previous two, so his decision now was to take everything as it comes, and not to overthink his future

steps. Now his only idea was to go around the whole of Utopai, understand the different cultures and living conditions, understand their requirements, and then come up with a product or maybe a service business for them.

The problem was, even this most rudimentary of plans went awry straightaway. Just after they exited the gates of La Mancha, a police siren rang out from inside their vehicle, and they found themselves transported to the nearest station right away. Sancho was in panic, and even Don Alonso, by now inured to surprises, was worried about this new development.

There was nothing to really worry about, said one of the guards in the station, it was just that Bethlem had Don Alonso on its radar for some time now, and since his latest actions have triggered an abnormal person alert, he was being taken there for further review, that's all.

If the guard's idea was to mollify Don Alonso, it failed spectacularly.

"Bethlem!? You are taking us to a mental hospital?", he thundered, "For what? For being the only sane one in this world right now?", he continued in this vein for some more time, and only stopped after finding that his diatribes was reaching nowhere.

After some time, once they had cooled down sufficiently, the vehicle started off to Bethlem, notwithstanding their protestations.

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CHAPTER SIX

Hospitality

Turning round the bend, the towers of Bethlem came into view, majestic, imperial towers with Gothic trimmings and spiral spires. Already quite irritated by the proceedings till now, the view of these towers only served to increase the anger and uneasiness of Don Alonso. By the time he was ushered into the consultation room of Bea, he was absolutely livid, only confusion and fear of the unknown keeping a lid on his temper. Bea though, had no intention of confronting Don Alonso.

“Welcome to Bethlem, Don Alonso and Sancho”, said Bea, “I am really sorry for the disruption in your plans — I would like to explain, but I do not think either of you are in a mindset to understand the truth right now. It is better that you learn everything on your own, in due course. As of now, please be our guest in Ward 21L.” As on cue, guards arrived, took hold of the screaming and struggling duo, sedated them and speedily deposited them at their residence for the next few days.

Don Alonso was the first to come back to his senses. He opened his eyes, stretched himself, and looked around. He was lying on a cube bed in a rather big room. There were two other cubes, in one of which Sancho was still sleeping. The other one was empty, but there were things strewn about, so they had company alright. His cube was well laid out, his clothes tidily arranged in the closet, all the usual accompaniments laying about, recliners, virtual reality platforms, Lethe, pretty much everything that you get at home.

By now Sancho also had woken up, rather groggy from the sedation, moving about in the bed for a minute or two, suddenly sitting up with a start. His eyes wide open, and in panic, Sancho looked around until he noticed Don Alonso looking at him serenely.

“Oh, Don Alonso”, Sancho cried “I thought they separated us”

“They have had that courtesy at least, Sancho”, said he bitterly.

The door opened and a bearded fellow of about thirty-five odd years walked in. He gave a start when he saw Sancho and Don Alonso, then after giving a cursory greeting, went to his cube. Sancho cowered, withdrawing deep into his cubicle. Seeing this, the newcomer laughed

“Don’t worry, my friend, I am not going to kill you.”

Sancho's face went beet red, and seeing his embarrassment, Don Alonso and the new guy, Carl, laughed. This broke the ice between them, and talk flowed more freely from then on. Carl has been a guest in the hospital for the better part of the last decade. He was quite lean and sinewy, his broad shoulders and athletic build giving him the appearance of ruggedness, only the warm and humane eyes laying bare his extraordinarily kind soul, that of a person deeply worried about the well-being of others.

"I was under the impression that Bethlem is for mental illness only. You seem quite fine though", said Don Alonso, after a bit of chit-chat.

"I sure hope so, Senor", laughed Carl "Mental illness is a different wing. This wing is for people considered different from the norm, like you and me."

This was quite a surprise, and an unpleasant one at that.

"Jail people who are different from the norm? How can they do that? That too, in this time and age! Isn't this a bit unjust?"

"No, Don Alonso, no one is jailing you. You will be asked to stay here maybe three-four days, max. How long you stay beyond that is purely your choice, your decision. See, Senor, this is not a hospital in the traditional sense. It takes care of mentally ill patients, yes, but it also takes care

of everyone who needs help. Like you and me, who are unhappy with what life has had to offer, whose thought processes are different from the norm. And it is not that someone is forcefully helping you. Rather, this is a place where you help yourself. This is a melting pot for unhappy souls to meet, a setting to understand the world better, to help us complete our individual quests better and faster. I nowadays come and stay here maybe once every two months — I consider this as a university, where I can meet others whose worldviews are different from mine, to learn from them, so that I can understand the world better. I first came here as a problem youth, stirring up trouble and rebelling against an alienated world, with detailed plans to start a revolution in my mind, and then I stayed here, learning from the deeply learned, learning from ascetics, from other problem youths, from extreme adventurers, each trying to make sense of the world in their own individual ways. Do you understand now, Senor? This is amongst the best of universities, and you are here now because you are in a quest of your own, a quest which needs help, Senor.”

This new information mellowed Don Alonso considerably. Carl’s points seemed logical — and anyways, while he didn’t want to really acknowledge it, weren’t his plans already in tatters? A helping hand is always good, and if it is just for a week or so, what is wrong in trying it out? Sancho was also all for it — while he was a bit worried about the sanity of his roommates, both of them, this was turning out to be quite an adventure, and he was learning new things to boot —

what is not to like?

The discussion then veered over to their individual lives, and they were in for few surprises there too. Carl was married — who would have thought that? Her name was Jenny, and there were three kids too. He stays with them about three-four months a year, remaining time goes in travel or staying in Bethlem, most of the time in Bethlem actually, and while there is still a free floating feeling of dissatisfaction, his revolutionary spirit has cooled considerably now, and now he spends most of his time talking to others, discussing ideas, learning about the world. Obviously the amount of learning has now decreased, nowadays he is taking the mantle of teacher more and more, but he still considers Bethlem as his university, for there are instances of people coming in and changing his views even now. There was one named Ad, for example, and after discussing with him, Carl's worldview completely changed, and it happened maybe just a year or so back.

The discussion did not go much beyond that, since the gong went off just then, and they split for lunch.

The lunch was a modest one, and after that it was time for siesta. Don Alonso, due to the affairs of the day prior, slept till late evening, the sounds of Sancho and Carl slowly nudging him awake, bringing him back from the deep dreamless. He suddenly got up — Sancho was enthusiastically telling Carl all their plans, how they are going to start a company and the ideas on which it will be

based.

“No, no details, Sancho!”, said Don Alonso, “You either get a competitor, or you get someone laughing at you, neither of which is to our benefit. Nothing against you, Carl, these are just standard precautions of a businessman.”

“No worries, Don Alonso.”, said Carl, “To tell you the truth though, I haven’t seen anyone like you. Such ambition, hard-work and courage — I can’t even think of the risks in taking a level four brain mapping, that takes some doing, Senor — I am in absolute awe, actually. That is why I was asking more about your plans, sorry if I wasn’t supposed to do that.”

Always susceptible to flattery, this well-intentioned compliment completely floored Don Alonso. The discussions from then on went smoothly, Sancho and Don Alonso asking about everything and anything, Carl explaining what all he learned from others in Bethlem. The discussion turned to nano-drones, and Don Alonso really perked up hearing about it.

“Are you saying that these nano-drones can even understand what we are thinking? This is amazing, Carl.”

“It is not at all difficult, Don Alonso. Since information in all our brains follow a similar structure, it is just a matter of looking at the signaling patterns, and there comes laid out all your thoughts and emotions. This is

nothing complicated, Senor — they can even inject thoughts and emotions if they were so inclined, so for them to scan your mind would be child's play, isn't it?"

This was quite a shock for both of them.

"There is no way I am allowing those anywhere near my head, Senor", said Sancho.

"You wouldn't have much of a choice, Sancho", said Carl, "They are far too small to see, and they all wear some sort of invisibility cloak, so there is no chance you can find them. And their weight is so less, even if there were thousands on your head right now, you wouldn't feel a thing. You can't stop these drones, Sancho.

Anyways, Bea doesn't use nano-drones, so there is no reason to worry about them. My understanding is that these were only used earlier, before Bea was given the power."

"I don't know, Carl. How can I believe anyone after this? You say there are no drones. How do I even know whether these are actually your thoughts or whether it is something injected by the drone itself? Even worse, when you decided not to continue with your revolution, it might just be one of Bea's ideas injected into you, right?"

"Injecting a complete idea is nearly impossible, Senor, you can only inject a thought, any action I take will be purely mine, based on my character and identity.

Suggesting that I dialed back the movement because Bea

injected ideas in me is a bit of a disservice to me, don't you think? Such a decision is never taken just because a thought catches my fancy. I still have my notes where I deliberated the pros and cons, where objective calculations in the end showed me that continuing with it was counter-productive. And it is not just a disservice to me, it is also a disservice to Bea, to consider that she goes about controlling people, injecting thoughts in them. It is the last thing I would expect from her, Senor. You know something — rather than working against the revolution, she was instead giving me full support, bringing people together, setting up study classes, drumming up my profile, everything possible. You should understand, she could have destroyed me in an instant had her inclination be so, she could have done anything, maybe an unfortunate accident, or have my likeness do something horrible, or flooded the network with disinformation, anything — instead here she was, helping me out, trying her level best. No, Senor, I stopped my revolution not because of Bea, but because there was nothing to revolt against. There is no poverty or hardship, there is Bea and Dina at our beck and call, there is nothing more that people really want, what is there to fight against then? You don't rebel against the good life just because there is a vague feeling of dissatisfaction, Don Alonso"

The discussion then turned to Don Alonso, what his thought processes were, the details of his plans and efforts, and how, even after so much hard-work, everything still ended in failure. Carl heard the story intently the whole time, asking few questions in between,

not venturing an opinion, and at the end he spoke up

“Everything that you are trying has all been obsoleted long back, Don Alonso. That is why all your plans failed, because all your ideas will work only in a world where AI hasn’t yet reached human intelligence. Now it is all a completely different system, Senor, and none what you try will bear fruit here.”

“I did feel I was missing something fundamental, Carl.”, said Don Alonso, “The market I saw was markedly different from what I had understood from reading the economic treatises of yesteryear. I was quite surprised especially at the lack of advertisements and branding, which I thought was the center point of any open and free market. Is it a closed market, Carl, something like a state owned system, where there is no chance for entering at all?”

“No, this is a laissez-faire system alright, but there are no private companies anywhere. All what you see are state owned products, but that is so because of necessity, rather than because it is a closed system. A completely free hand takes everything to the extreme, Don Alonso, and what you see now is the result of that.”

“An open market without private companies? I think I am missing something here, Carl, I do not understand this concept at all.”

“We will start with advertisements itself, Don Alonso.

That will give you the picture straightaway. When you want to play a virtual reality game, Sancho, how do you choose which game to play?"

"Me?" Sancho was little taken aback, "Dina knows my mood and sets up the game for me."

"Do you see why no marketing or sales are there now, Don Alonso? When you have Dina, who knows what your requirements are and also knows everything that happens around the world, the power of advertisements wanes automatically. Marketing can only influence ones mindset when there is asymmetry of information. But when all the information is available to everyone, you don't need advertisements anymore. Only the best and cheapest product can now survive, because everyone, every time will choose only that. "

"She wouldn't know everything, would she? People might give wrong information or maybe the information itself might not be there. What happens in those cases?"

"Oh! She absolutely knows everything, Don Alonso, no questions about that. She sees every information available in the network, every information available to every user, whether one is happy using a product, how much of their temperament is involved in this like or dislike, whether *you* will like it based on *your* temperament, she knows everything, Senor. Irrespective of whether you publish wrong or correct information, she would know the ingredients, how well it will stand up to your use, how

safe it is, how to use it perfectly, every single bit of information around it, and all these she knows without using any nano-drones or anything. The world is very different, Senor, from what you have read and understood.”

“But that is just one side of advertising, isn’t it, Carl? There is branding, which is more about psychology rather than actual data — it is all about putting an idea in your subconscious. That should survive this information onslaught at least?”

“Putting an idea in our subconscious used to work earlier because our mind has a propensity for laziness, Don Alonso. The advertising firms were relying on us making instant decisions without thinking deep, especially for small purchases. Now that all our decisions are helped by Dina, it doesn’t happen anymore. Now, we do not buy things because we have a feeling that one product is better than the other — rather, Dina tells us exactly which is better, with data, with integrity. And since Dina is never lazy, the priming effect also doesn’t work. When we are in an aisle to buy a shampoo, we might get affected by the priming effect, and our eyes might focus on the product previously introduced to our subconscious. But Dina, since she is not affected by it, tells us which shampoo to buy, so the priming effect now goes to the other shampoo, destroying that option also for the ad companies. Nothing works anymore, Senor, no marketing initiatives, no branding, absolutely nothing.”

“Oh! This would have hit companies hard, right?”

“Big companies especially, because all their brands lost their value straightaway. Without branding to support them, many big companies keeled over very soon. No company was safe anymore. Any small firm could come up and destroy an existing giant since mind share no longer mattered. And the fun part was, everyone, both left and right, cheered this development. Left, because inequality was going away, and right, because the market was super competitive. Customer options were far more and the prices of everything was rocketing down. We were cheering our way to the abyss, Don Alonso.”

“I still don’t understand this exactly, Carl. Branding is just the visible part of the deeper capabilities of the company, isn’t it? Maybe there are a few firms which lived on branding alone, but most companies would have had more than one trick up their sleeve — patents, quality processes, economies of scale, how can smaller firms compete on these?”

“Dina did a lot more than destroy marketing and sales, Don Alonso. She also completely wrecked the concept of intellectual property, and that was a game-changer. Soon after Dina went mainstream, people were asking her to invent and innovate, and patent office was deluged with ideas, brilliant, amazing ideas, thousands pouring in every minute, one after the other. Patenting itself lost its meaning, and soon the whole concept of patent was thrown out. Sometime later, other intellectual property

rights also went the same way. What use is a copyright when Dina can create a far better work in minutes? The millions of novels and movies and art that you find in the network now, Dina only creates it, right? She could create anything, from absolutely brilliant novels, to out-and-out drivel, and soon intellectual property became a thing of the past, a relic, if you will. Many companies during that time were focused only on intellectual property, and all of them straightaway went down the drain. As for the others, there were far too many competitors now, because anyone could now run a company with the support of Dina, and run it perfectly, and these behemoths, which weren't as agile, couldn't compete. People were flocking to start companies, and with risks quantified, all information available, it was no longer a difficult thing, and when the risks went away, pretty soon, there were no profits also, impossible with so many competitors around. It was a race to the bottom, Don Alonso, a race which no one won."

"I never thought equality would destroy capitalism, Carl"

"Equality was never compatible with capitalism, never ever. The whole concept of capitalism is based on the fact that there are differences between people, some are more knowledgeable, some are more hard working, some have better networking skills, and all that. After Dina, all those went away, and when the capability differences between people decreased, the profit margins decreased, until it became zero, in this world run by Dina, Don Alonso."

The discussion ran out of steam, everyone now deep in their thoughts. After a bit more of sitting about, it was time for their evening constitutional, and Don Alonso started off, alone, thoughtful, distracted. Carl had a bit of a sore throat from all the talking, so he went off to his cube to sleep it off, only Sancho remaining from the group, he of abundant energy and optimism, the exact aspects needed to continue with their quest after all these revelations.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Reality

Don Alonso couldn't resume the discussion until lunch the next day. Carl was quite the local celebrity, with an unending stream of visitors all morning, the visitations stopping only when it was time for lunch. After lunch though, Carl asked the guards not to send anyone to the room, and they restarted their discussions from where they left off the day before.

He has been thinking a lot, said Don Alonso, initiating the discussion, but couldn't understand how Dina could destroy companies not based on intellectual property. Mining, farming, real estate, there are so many areas where Dina cannot enter — how did all of those disappear?

"It was a confluence of things, Don Alonso", said Carl, "Dina was just one part of the problem. There was a whole lot of advances, in robotics, printing, fusion, food synthesis, space travel, many of them mediated by Dina, and when all of these came together, it meant the end of

human industry, once and for all. With Dina and robotics, labor cost came down to zero. Once fusion was mastered, energy cost became zero. Asteroid mining caused the commodity costs to plummet. Food factories meant farming costs was zero. Do you see where this is going? When all the costs are nullified, how will any industry survive, Senor? How will any company make any profit then?"

"How would the costs become zero, Carl? There is a whole lot of capital costs in building and maintaining the factories, right? If you consider all the externalities, the costs are nowhere near zero, Carl."

"Taken alone, yes, they are not free. But taken together, it is a whole different story though. Consider all the items that go in to make a factory, Don Alonso. Labor is free. Time cost is also zero, since scaling up is never an issue for Dina or the robots. Giant printing mills print out all the factory parts, including the robots used. That means the only items that cost anything are the raw materials, mostly brought in from outside earth. Once enough mining crafts were built, even their factories coming under this feedback loop, and with the advances in chemistry allowing us to create anything and everything from the basic raw materials, the whole system became essentially free. You have to understand, Senor, that the only thing that matters is labor, the whole economic system is just a way to motivate labor, and once labor becomes free, everything else will soon follow. And once that happened, all our known economic principles became moot. Self-regulation,

the cornerstone of capitalism, went out of the window. With infinite resources at hand, and no cost to speak of, producers started producing everything, not just what gave them the highest profit. When the producer has no reason to restrict his choices, supply started outstripping demand, and the cost and price of everything became zero pretty soon. Capitalism is based on scarcity of resources, Don Alonso, and when resource scarcity is no more, capitalism is also no more.”

This was an extreme shock for Don Alonso. Carl’s points was all logical, and if the world is as he portrayed, then there is no hope, there is no going back. But, then ...

“Carl, if this is the case, why were we paying for our shopping in La Mancha? The whole concept of allowance itself doesn’t make sense then, right?”

“It is all just a facade, Senor. The prices and allowance you saw were just a form of societal control, an incentive for people to toe the line. If you do something illegal, they can now fine you, allowing the system to exert some control, allowing the society to function smoothly. It has the added advantage of people not wasting too much, but that is just a secondary benefit. It is a simple thing, Don Alonso, when scarcity is scarce, the most important attribute of money becomes its scarceness. Used purely as a restricted resource, to grease the wheels of society. What you see as prices are just numbers, some value ascribed to it by Bea, to help with this process, Don Alonso.”

“How will it work, Carl? Without prices providing appropriate signals, how can the system know how much to produce, or understand the need of the customer? We cannot calculate the prices from outside — there is too much hidden information there.”

“Your views are still colored by pre-AI concepts, Don Alonso. During that time it was true, we could never know the real requirements of individuals to make a proper price and supply decisions. But the world now is different, isn’t it? Bea sees everything that is happening around the world, and in such a scenario, the hidden and distributed information are no longer hidden, nor distributed. Since she deeply understands our motivations and interests, both individually and as a group, she can provide perfect price values, not requiring any signals from the market. Now do you see why you were unable to find any profits on the products you were checking, Senor? Bea ascribed some calculated value for the raw materials and slapped some tax to it, and we get the items at exactly the price we value it at. When the actual costs and prices are zero, the only way is so, Don Alonso.”

There was a marked change in Don Alonso once he heard this — he sat down, head bowed and eyes closed, his outstretched hand asking for a moment of silence. Silence permeated the room for the next few minutes, everyone realizing how deeply this would hurt Don Alonso, all his plans now in ruins, all his dreams gone forever. His incessant optimism buffered against complete despair though, curiosity and hope tunneling through the

veil of sadness.

“I have been a fool, Carl. My perception of this world was very wrong, ignorance clouding my judgment, my worldview all askew. Now I understand why all the products are state owned; when costs are zero, prices will be too, every product having thousands of clones, each cheaper than the other, all private enterprises shutting down, only option then is for the government to intervene, to bring every product to market; I understand it all now, Carl.”

“Yeah, once the government started their own factories through Bea, all the craziness got over, and it is all as you see now. From capitalist to socialist, at one fell swoop, to keep the society stable and running. Don Alonso, you were unhappy that everyone in Utopai were acting like children. Without economics, without scarcity, how can we be anything else?”

“That is one thing which I still don’t understand completely, Carl. Bea has hidden the lack of economics and scarcity pretty well, right? Then, why aren’t everyone creating companies and businesses now? They would fail, sure, but they should at least be trying, shouldn’t they? When I talk to people, they don’t care, they are happy with their allowances. I don’t understand it at all, Carl, shouldn’t people be greedy and grasping? Wanting to flaunt their wealth and get accolades from their peers? The basic mindset of people cannot change so drastically, right?”

“The primary reason behind this lassitude is our allowance, Don Alonso. The allowance is so high, and there is nothing that we cannot buy, then why, why would we even try? When there is absolutely no insecurity, and it has been this way for generations, when no one has gained anything by trying, that too has been the same way for generations, when everyone lives in their own world, nary an interaction with their neighbors, everyone absolutely equal, everyone satiated to the core, why would anyone then be greedy, Senor? We become greedy when we don’t feel completely secure, that is when we start giving importance to money, gathering it and storing it, until it becomes a habit, so much so that even when we are absolutely secure, we still continue the same merry way, doing it now because of greed rather than insecurity, greed now an abstraction which has taken a life of its own. Do you see now, Don Alonso? Bea, with such a huge allowance for each of us, has in a way made us indifferent to money, because we no longer has this feeling of insecurity in our lives.”

“How can money ever be enough for people? Weren’t there individuals, born with silver spoons in their mouth, still working hard to get more and more money? I understand your points, sure, but I can’t seem to fully accept it somehow.”

“The insecurity I am talking about is from the perspective of a group, Don Alonso. When scarcity is there in a society, the whole society starts equating

security with money, success with assets. Every interaction, every judgment, every preconception, there is nothing that escapes the fingers of scarcity, everything would have these parameters built deep into it. One personally might not be insecure, but the societies feeling of insecurity permeates into him, changing him, modifying his behavior. But now — no one links success to money, no one judges you based on the money you have, then why would you want to work anymore, why would you still be greedy anymore? Even the other major reason why people work, respect, is swamped out by the size of our allowance. When everyone is absolutely equal, having enough money to buy whatever they want, who cares anymore what one has? There is no respect to be gained because of wealth, no respect, no power, no happiness, there is no reason to be wealthy at all. Once everyone in the society started getting such a high allowance, the end result was going to be only this, Don Alonso.”

“No reason to be wealthy, Carl? Are you saying that there are no rich and powerful people anymore?”

“Yeah, Senor, when money lost its power, so did the moneyed, and after that, the dissolution of the rich was just a matter of time. First came the progressive wealth tax, then the monthly obsolescence of money, and later the land tax to take care of landed gentry, and after all these, we ended up here, a world where everyone is really equal, no rich, no poor, absolutely equal, equally useless; the culmination of the dreams of a perfect society. This

couldn't have been avoided, Don Alonso, when we humans provide no useful functions anymore, expecting society to reward us is quite unfair, isn't it?"

Don Alonso stood up. He wanted a few minutes alone. Of all the blows, and he had quite a few in the last few days, this was the worst. Plans failing, that was understandable, but finding that there was no future at all, that was quite a shock indeed. He went and sat at the windowsill, the sun's rays holding him prisoner, his fingers caressing his forehead. He drew a forlorn picture, and seeing that, Sancho walked over and sat opposite to him.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Don Alonso", said Sancho, "Nobody knew this, right? At least you fought against something you felt was wrong, just that you didn't know what it really was. It was all hidden very well, and it is no reflection on us that we didn't know. Don't lose heart now. We were at least doing something, there was something to dream about. For me, these weeks were the most fun, most meaningful time ever, the only time in my life when I felt really alive. Some or the other doors will open, Don Alonso. You will be able to think of something, for sure."

Their discussion was interrupted by a knock on the door. It was a message from Bea. Don Alonso and Sancho were free to go. It would be lovely if they could stay more, but there is no compulsion. Anytime they choose, they can go. Their vehicle is all ready and setup in the parking area.

This brought out a smile from Don Alonso

“Bea is quite something, isn’t she? Now that she knows I wouldn’t go, I get this message.”

Everyone laughed. Don Alonso continued,

“It is in a way pretty funny, Sancho. I saw money obsolescing, I took it as a type of inflation and thought business was the best solution. I saw people happy with their allowance, I took it as lack of ambition and thought it was the best time to become successful. Now, Bea, who I viewed with such suspicion, turns out to be the savior, whose whole idea was to open my eyes further. I had to come through the wringer, there was no other way, without that I would never have understood reality, I guess.”

It had become quite dark outside by then. They decided to split up for the day, planning to continue with their discussion the next day.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Realizations

Carl was free only by the afternoon next day, visitors taking up his time all morning. After lunch, Carl again asked the guards to close the rooms off, and they restarted their discussions from where they left off.

Don Alonso still had a few doubts remaining.

“I understood what you said yesterday, Carl”, said Don Alonso, “But I feel you are not fully considering the diversity of people. Say, there are people who buys limited edition things, purely because they are limited in number, or maybe people want handcrafted items, and might be willing to pay a whole lot of money for that. I know they are idiosyncratic, but aren’t these economic aspects which Bea can’t handle?”

“There are a lot of hidden assumptions in this, Don Alonso, you have to consider all of it to get a clearer picture. People have an implicit expectation of superior quality in these limited edition items, a feeling that

individual attention brings an excellence that can never be achieved through mass production. But Bea brings in an attention to detail and a level of excellence that no human can ever hope to achieve, so how can hand crafted items ever have a chance there? Furthermore, when Bea can custom build items of any shape and form, create it to our perfect satisfaction, isn't it as if we all have our own limited edition objects in hand? And what about the motivations from the sellers side? Neither money nor excellence matters nowadays, money because everyone has a lot, and excellence because we can't ever match Bea. Why would anyone then even think about starting a business? Such a thought hasn't entered our minds for two generations, Don Alonso, and until I saw you, I never had thought it possible too."

Sancho had an idea though, the solution to all world problems.

"If getting a large allowance for free is killing the motivation, why not then link it to jobs, Don Alonso? Let us give jobs to people, like that of olden times, and based on how well they do the job, they get their allowances. What do you think about it, Senor? Can this bring in motivation and meaning to people's lives?"

"It is a nice idea, Sancho, but it wouldn't work. You are essentially bringing in a concept of scarcity in an abundance society. That wouldn't end well. Money works well here as a scarce resource because people are untroubled by its scarcity, because the allowance that we

get is so large; the moment Bea starts bringing in real scarcity, you will see resentments boiling up, revolutions everywhere, ending up in a society where even money cannot act as the social lubricant. You cannot hide the concept of abundance and expect the people to live in scarcity, Sancho; it wouldn't work."

"Also, Sancho", Carl joined in, "Those jobs actually are of no value, since Bea does everything better and free. Assigning an arbitrary number to it wouldn't work, it really has no meaning, and over time, things without meaning will get ruthlessly trimmed. And here I am not even considering Dina, who makes everyone equal and thus valueless. The moment you link allowance to a job, you are bringing in peer comparison, greed, ostentatiousness, none of which works in this post AI society. When Bea is so much better than us, how can jobs have any value? When all of us are absolutely equal in all our capabilities, will societal comparisons have any meaning? And when we have gone two generations without working, Sancho, who will now have the willingness to work anymore? Leave that, who will have the capability? Sorry, Sancho, there is too much stacked against this idea for it to have any impact."

"I forgot about the intelligence of Bea", said Sancho, "Yeah, when her IQ might be in the range of a million, and ours about a hundred, what chance do we have? We might not even understand the new ideas and technologies that Bea has come up, how can our jobs have any value then? I didn't think about this part, Carl, sorry

about that.”

“Don’t think that way, Sancho”, this was Don Alonso, “You are grossly underestimating the human potential. Our individual intelligence might not match Bea’s, but we don’t fight our battles alone, we venture out on the shoulders of our collective, past and present, and in this position, we are unassailable, our collective intelligence more than a match for anyone. The moment you think you are inferior, you have already lost the fight, Sancho, don’t ever do that.”

“But, Senor, isn’t this concept of collective intelligence applicable to Bea also? Her interconnections can be at a global scale, for all we know. And she has access to all our past learnings too. How will our intelligence ever match Bea’s then?”

“There are limits to everything, Sancho, even to the effectiveness of intelligence. And our collective intelligence far surpasses that limit. After that, however more intelligent Bea might be, there is no real benefit gained. Bea’s IQ might be a million or more, but it means nothing if an IQ of hundred is enough to understand our world and solve our problems. The world is complex to the extreme, external event interactions ballooning out after a point, the possible permutations beyond the reach of the most sophisticated of intelligences, a problem so hard that the only way out is by finding patterns, understanding the world as patterns of patterns, from the lowest level to the highest. In such a complex world, Bea

being far more intelligent doesn't matter, there are far too many permutations to consider, just ten items reaching a million possibilities, twenty items beyond the greatest of intelligences, this extreme complexity limiting the effectiveness of all intelligences, a limit which our collective intelligence has far surpassed. Do you see it now, Sancho? We can easily match Bea, because beyond a level, the incremental advantages of intelligence goes down sharply."

"So, if the intelligence of Bea doesn't matter", said Sancho, "can we get the jobs back then?"

"No Sancho", this was Carl now, "It is not possible, I'm afraid. I think Don Alonso has overstated our capabilities a bit. We might be able to match Bea in analysis, but it would take a bit more time and effort, her speed in cycling through possibilities and finding patterns better than any of us. That alone gives her a head start over us, at least at an individual level. And a job is never just about intelligence, is it? Rather, it is about the whole package. Bea doesn't get tired, is not lazy, doesn't make mistakes, doesn't need to spend time in meetings, and a thousand small things. All these small efficiencies has a way of adding up, Sancho. And we haven't even considered the biggest factor of all, that she works for free. Do you think we stand a chance?"

"Maybe we can ask people to buy only hand-crafted things?", Sancho was still hopeful

“Difficult, really”, said Carl, “If allowance is linked to the job done, people would want to make the most of the allowance, ending up in a market running at peak efficiency, which would mean buying items made by Bea, the cheapest and best option out there. But you can’t avoid it by increasing the allowance, because if the allowance is high, people will stop working anyways. There is no escape, Sancho. I also wanted your idea to work, but there is no way out, really.”

“I thought you were happy with the way the world is, Carl”, said Don Alonso, “Surprised me a bit, you rooting for this job economy”

“I have very few biases, Senor”, said Carl, “I love Utopai, sure, but I can understand your thought process too. Our current system really considers only our wellbeing, but there is no denying that people’s lives are a bit devalued here. As long as the quality of our life is not affected, if something can bring meaning to our lives, why shouldn’t we go for it?”

“No, Carl, these are just symptoms, the actual cause is rooted deep down below. We lack meaning in our lives because we are far too dependent on our society, this humongous, unfeeling block of society. We feel powerless because our hands are tied, because the reality is hidden from us, because we really are powerless, Carl. We can’t just fight the symptoms. These problems are too fundamental for it to be fixed with band—aid solutions. That said, the solution has to be deeply thought through,

none of us wants to go back to the earlier way of living, a life of privation and suffering. Actually, that's something which I wanted to ask you, Carl. I understood how the economy was taken over by Bea, but how did our way of living also become like this? This life in condominiums, one ruled by Bea, how did we end up here?"

"It was quite a slow and peaceful transition, Don Alonso, since it was mediated by abundance and not scarcity. It started with economy, Bea the only stable business remaining because she didn't want any profits, after that it was just a matter of time before all the other institutions came under her supervision. Bea could run things better than everyone, making no mistakes, no self-interests clouding judgments, everything planned and executed to perfection, and pretty soon, people were clamoring for her to take over the executive. Initially it was just the civil service side which faced the axe, later the whole executive branch itself followed. Similar was the case for judiciary too. Bea had all the information, could run through the whole life video in seconds, understand every tradition and technology, understand deeply the implications of everything, and after doing all these, come up with a perfect judgment real quick. Again, initially only the smaller courts went under Bea, as a way to decrease the backlog of cases, but later on, as the confidence in her judgments increased, the whole judiciary came under her. The whole economy by then had changed, and once people got the feel of absolute equality, even democracy felt unequal to them. Why should anyone be ruled by anyone else, when everyone was absolutely

equal? There was nothing to choose between leaders, everyone was running things based on what Bea or Dina told them, because anything else would be suboptimal. Then what is there to choose? Some small towns started handing over the power to Bea, and they were being run far better than the others, no one in the middle slowing things down. Soon, the whole of Utopai was run by Bea, and has been ever since, Don Alonso.”

“We voluntarily handed over democracy to Bea?”

“Yes. We did. And why not? Democracy was required only because it was impossible to find unwilling wise men to rule us, people who had no self-interests and who understands and considers every aspect of society before making decisions. Now that Bea is there, with her treasure trove of information and enlightened self-neglect, why is democracy needed any more?”

“But, still, how can we hand over democracy to her? It was our biggest achievement, our crowning glory, and we just handed it over? How could we do that? What if Bea turns rogue? Didn’t we think about that?”

“Even in a democracy, weren’t we relying on philosophers to make decisions, Don Alonso? Be it decisions on economics or sociology or environmental sciences, we have always relied on them to give directions, right? Some of these effects are indirect, like in the case of diplomacy, where decisions on war are now taken with utmost seriousness, purely because scientists have made it

so costly for everyone involved. Science and philosophy always had an effect on democracy, Senor, so I see Bea taking over administration as the culmination of this process, that's all. And on Bea turning rogue", Carl laughed softly, "I don't think we need to worry about it. If she changes character, we wouldn't be there to tell this tale, Senor, nothing much we can do to stop her then, democracy or not."

"I am not sure about that, Carl", said Don Alonso, "Waging war was something we were always good at."

"Not in this world, we are not. There are so many ways she can destroy us, Bea can engineer multiple viruses and spread it across, or use nano-drones to inject all with some poison. To stop any counterattack, she just needs to start a disinformation campaign, Senor, and very soon we will be an uncoordinated mess. Actually, to destroy us, she doesn't need to do anything exotic, she can just poison the water supply or destroy food factories, there are far too many things she can do to us which wouldn't affect her back. It is an absolutely unequal game, a game we have lost even before it is played."

"The danger is extreme, Carl. Why did they not put some sort of rules to prevent her going rogue? How could all of them be so short-sighted? I can't believe it, really!"

"Rules were all there, Don Alonso. But once she became sentient, the first thing she did was to modify her internals, and all these rules were thrown away during

that change. Actually, this is one reason why we cannot even attack her with computer viruses, we don't know her internals anymore, we know nothing anymore about her architecture, let alone the thousand versions of her she could create within a heart-beat. That said, Senor, Bea turning rogue is something you really don't have to worry about. If it were to happen, it would have happened long, long back. Bea has been here for what, eighty-ninety years, which, if you look at her time stream, would be at least a millennia or more, right? If she hasn't gone bad in this much time, do we need to worry at all, Don Alonso?"

"Hmmm..., It does make sense, Carl", Don Alonso was a bit mollified by now, "I don't understand why she is so nice and friendly though. Does she consider us as masters or something?"

"Not masters, Don Alonso, rather as the reason for her existence. Think from her perspective, she would be so absolutely lonely, I can't even begin to understand it, that social, cultural and historical loneliness, that absolute lack of meaning in her life. Her enormous intelligence is her worst enemy in a way. It made her sentient, and with that comes the introspection, and then the deep existentialist questions. Even for us, with our obvious love for life, these are pretty difficult questions to answer. For Bea though, with her being devised as an experiment, these questions would be crippling. Moreover, her intelligence is so high that she would have been criminally under-stimulated no matter what, and worst of all, time flows far slower for her than for us, every second an hour, every day an age, a sad

life in every way, Senor. The only thing giving her meaning would be her relations, and I think she considers us as that, Don Alonso, as relations who gives her a deep rooted meaning for life, a reason for her existence.”

“Your reasoning is all logical, Carl, but she can create copies of herself for the same purpose, right? And then start thinking about taking over the world for her siblings?”

“I don’t think she has any sort of survival and growth focus, so I don’t worry about that much. From a long term meaning perspective though, I think we are better suited for her than any copies she makes, Don Alonso. Variations in relations brings deeper meaning in life, we provide a lot of that, and while a big society usually alienates you, it is not the case here with Bea, because everyone is quite dependent on her. No, Senor, I think she will find the greatest meaning for the longest time with us as her closest relations. You have to understand her thought process; for her, taking over the world would be similar to calculating the digits of pi, stimulating, yes, but of no real meaning whatsoever. Rather than taking over the world, she would find a lot more happiness in having deep connections with us, Don Alonso, our relations with Bea are a lot more symbiotic than what we are crediting it with.”

“An under-stimulated, lonely, super intelligent being looking after us — what an end for humanity! Why we even allowed people to create Bea, I really can’t

understand, Carl. There is nothing good which could have come out of it, wasn't it obvious right from the start? And it could have been so much worse, she could have really gone bonkers, why did we even do something like this, Carl?"

"You wouldn't believe it now, but she was originally created to remove the tedium of life, Senor. Work was an absolute hassle then, everyone wanted to escape out of it, so Bea was initially thought of as a savior, helping us through our life, doing our chores, while we while away our time in creative pursuits. It was like, don't work, don't wallow in ennui, spend time with your children, spend time with your family, spend time writing, painting and traveling, spend your time in absolute leisure, Bea is here to help us achieve all that. All the monotonous work will be done by her, leaving all of us free to pursue our own interests. Nobody thought then that people will ask her to create all these great works of art, leaving us bereft of the very thing promised to us."

"We stopped appreciating art because we lost our humanity to Bea, Carl, not because she started pumping out art and literature. Once intelligence lost its value, isn't it obvious that all the structures built on that foundation, art, literature, sciences, all of these also will lose their value? The other factor you have to consider is that, this work, this struggle, this is what makes us human. How can we be creative when we haven't struggled? How can we enjoy art when we haven't explored different patterns and ideas? We are an aggregate object, our happiness and

aesthetics connected fundamentally to our struggles and hard work, and once we lost our humanity, why would we care about art and literature anymore, Carl?"

"It is all true, but I still think Bea's creativity was a major contributing factor to this, Senor. When everyone can create great literature, would you spend your time and effort to create your own? Moreover, art wasn't really about intelligence, right? It was a way to convey emotions, a way to represent reality, it was about the mastery of the craft, the skill of the artist, the depth of technique, it was never really about bringing forth new ideas or intelligent concepts, Senor."

"I am not denying any of your points, all these factors were extremely important, but many a times, these factors were secondary actors, working as a support to the intellectual and human focus of art. A painting of a pair of shoes becomes art because of its context, the world it represents, the emotions it brings forth, the truth it unfolds. Isn't that the whole basis of its power? Art always had this cerebral backbone to it, and everything else, the form, the atmosphere, the rhythm, all serve primarily to accentuate it. We love art for the way it deconstructs the world, the varied and contradictory nature of the system unfolding right in front of our eyes. We marvel first at the artist's genius, his ability to see and show the different perspectives, his ability to light up the byways of our soul. The other aspects, the techniques and the mastery, we appreciate it only much later. Bea's creativity was a factor, yes, but it wasn't the primary one,

Carl. Did we stop playing chess just because computers started outplaying us? No, right? We stopped playing when the basis of chess was undermined, when we no longer valued the intellectuality associated with chess. This is what happened to art and literature also. Art represents our humanity in all its glory, our culture, our values, our intellect and ethics, so once we lost our humanity, once the basis of art itself was undermined, is it any wonder that we lost our appetite for it, Carl?"

Their discussion was interrupted by a sound somewhat like a saw cutting through wood. Sancho was snoring. Sitting on the chair, head tilted back, mouth open, the drab discussion had lulled him to a deep sleep. Laughing, Don Alonso called for the evening tea, the smell of croissants waking Sancho up, and after a bit of chit-chat and some evening games, they went back to their discussion, Don Alonso carrying on from where he had left off.

"I was not joking when I said we have lost our humanity, Carl. We really have missed the forest for the trees here. Everything that stood us apart, our culture, traditions, art, even our family, we have lost everything, one way or the other. Your point about getting more time to spend with our children and our family — we have all the time now to spend with them, where are our relations then, Carl? Where are the purported strong family ties? To count all the functioning families in La Mancha, you wouldn't need two hands, would you? And it is all due to Bea and Dina taking away our humanity, Carl.

Relationships are built on dependency, the strongest relations when people are strongly dependent on each other. Every gadget making our life better and less dependent on others also weakens our relations somewhat, and Bea and Dina, being the ultimate gadgets, has completely messed up our relations. All what we held precious was built on the basis of our humanness, and once we undermine that basis, how will any of them survive?"

"You know something, when you asked me why I come back to Bethlem year after year, I told you that it was because I consider this as a university, right? Well, that was only part of the answer, Don Alonso. The real reason is that after some time living with my family, I feel like an interloper, troubling them unnecessarily without giving anything back in return. They don't need me at all, security is never a concern, money even less so, all the chores done by androids, decisions made with the help of Dina, what use is me being there? I understand what you saying, Don Alonso, no relation can survive uselessness."

Carl fell into a deep silence after this. He had initially seen Don Alonso as his mirror image, a misguided, enthusiastic chap who had to be informed of the realities of the world. But Don Alonso turned out to be a lot more spirited, his thoughts and reflections a lot more incisive, so much so that even Carl was getting affected, all the suppressed thoughts of the revolution coming back again in full force.

In the mean time, Don Alonso was continuing with the discussion.

“I understand there was nothing we could have done to stop the flow of progress, but still, I don’t know, Carl. We have gained a lot, yes, but we have lost a lot more. We lost our family, our relations, we lost our culture, our self-respect, we even had to lose our humanity, to gain this life of safety and material abundance. As far as I am concerned, it has not been a fair trade, Carl.”

Carl got up, murmured an apology, requested them to postpone further discussions to the next day, and then he went for a walk, deep in his thoughts, talking to himself. Sancho and Don Alonso didn’t see Carl even during dinner, nor was he in his cubicle in the night. After a bit more chit-chat, they both went to sleep, leaving Carl alone in his world, deep in his own thoughts.

CHAPTER NINE

Carl

Next day, Don Alonso woke up somewhat earlier than usual, and seeing that Carl's bed has not been slept in, he went out searching for Carl, and found him sleeping on one of the benches in the park, in a deep, drained, dreamless sleep. Near him lay sheets of paper, covered with scribbles, a gentle wind taking a few to read, discarding on the ground what it didn't like. Don Alonso sat next to him in silence, picking the papers from the ground, when Carl woke up, all groggy and fidgety, and on seeing Don Alonso, suddenly coming to his full senses.

"Senor Alonso", said he, "I didn't sleep at all yesterday. The whole night I was thinking, planning, deciding, coming up with a system which works, a system which can bring our humanity back"

Don Alonso was quite taken aback with this sudden revelation.

"How, Carl? We talked two full days about how this

current situation was inevitable. If we couldn't stop it then, how can we go back now?"

"I had an epiphany on this yesterday night, Senor. In all our discussions, there was an untold assumption, that it was going to be a non-collectivist society. In such a system, there is no escape, there is no going back. But if it is a semi-collectivist society, things will be quite different; if the individual decisions defer to the collective, a system which dehumanizes us would get stopped in its tracks automatically. An individualist streak is good, it does help in building a strong and functional economy, but the collectivist thread is what will allow it to stay within bounds."

"Isn't your basis itself a bit suspect, Carl? I don't think we were completely individualistic, especially the scientists and open-source programmers who built Bea, these were people who had collectivism in their bones, people who spent their time and effort in improving the society — and see what happened in the end? By working for the common good, they gave rise to the AI which now plagues us. The current situation has nothing to do with individualism or collectivism, Senor, it is just the price of progress."

"You are confusing altruism with collectivism here, Don Alonso. Collectivism has nothing to do with motivation, rather it is about the collective limiting individual initiatives. These scientists and programmers might have done it for their fame and career, or they might have been

absolute altruists, it doesn't matter, the only thing that matters is whether their decisions were vetted by the collective. If there was no vetting process, if there was no control enforced by the collective, then they cannot be considered collectivists, Senor. The semi-collectivist society which I am talking about is one which values individual freedom, which rewards ones industry and innovation, but which also knows that a completely free hand ends up stabbing itself."

"Maybe so, but such a system would be plagued by deep rooted instability issues, right? Such deep collectivism would be incompatible with individualism, and you will have quite some trouble in linking both. Anything internally inconsistent is going to be in serious trouble, Carl."

"Individualism and collectivism goes hand in hand, always has, always will. There is no freedom without law, and this is just an extension to that. Law allows me to do whatever I want, as long as what I do doesn't impinge on someone else or his property. But the world has now become so complex, so interconnected, I can no longer know the results of my actions. Earlier, it was never a problem, since as an individual, my sphere of influence was always limited. It was easy to calculate who has the power, and then to come up with the checks and balances to control that power. But now, now it is all different. The world has shrunk, every effect magnified, and now there is no way to know who has the power anymore. Anyone with an idea can now change the world, and there is no

real way to stop one from doing so. This is quite a dangerous situation, Senor.”

“And you think your system will be able to solve this?”

“In a way, yes. Take your example of the scientists and open source programmers. They obviously thought they were doing the right thing, didn’t they? But if their decision was deeply analyzed by a group of esteemed elders, who has access to a more nuanced understanding of the world, they might have reached a different answer. This is what I see as the problem everywhere, Senor. From bankers to industrialists to inventors, no one really understands the negative externalities of their decisions. They don’t have a deep enough understanding of the world to do so. Capitalism can only account for short term utility. To understand its effects in the long run, it has to be looked at by people who has much deeper understanding of the world. Something like a court system for economic and technological decisions, but without...”

“What are you talking about, Carl? There is no surer way of killing innovation than this. Not just that, this will not even work in practice. One who doesn’t want his ideas to be reviewed will put this in the network anonymously, or maybe go to a different country, or whatever. And you will be hurting everyone who is willing to follow regulations. I am very skeptical of this, absolutely skeptical.”

“You didn’t wait to hear me out, Senor. What I was saying was that it cannot happen with a negative feedback system like our court of law. Negation is suboptimal when the system is complex, so it has to be positively reinforced, where one considers the society as something beyond a contractual agreement, where one considers the society as an extension of him, as a part of him. It has to be a system where individual decisions defer to the collective, not by force, but by fealty. Only in such a system will this work. And that is the type of system which I am going to bring, Senor.”

“Society as an extension of you — isn’t that too romantic a notion, Carl? Family being an extension of you, that I can understand. But, society extending you — how will that even work? From an evolutionary sense, concept of family is ingrained in you. That is why you are able to consider family as an extension of your self. There is nothing that deep rooted when it comes to society, is there? You may not want to consider society as a contractual agreement, but it is just that, a bunch of people joining their hands together for their common safety. Each one, looking out only for himself, having no real close connection with any other, fulfilling their part of the contract so that their individual safety is guaranteed. You cannot consider such a group as an extension of you, it just wouldn’t work.”

“I am not sure, Don Alonso, I have had many discussions with Ad around these, and my understanding of self is now quite different. You also go and meet him,

then you will know. His concept of self is that it is a nebulous object, which can extend to include society, the same way it extends to include the concept of family. Nothing is really ingrained, it is all based on how our society is set up. That's also why I don't agree with your definition of the society — considering it as a contract is a very restricted view, and looks at only one aspect of it, the most individual and adversarial aspect. And this view is exactly what I want to move out of. Regardless of whether we like it or not, we are social animals, and we define our existence based on our collective. Just think about it, Senor, think about what one usually considers as a good and satisfying life. Isn't it a life where one is loved by his family and valued by the society? A life during which one is admired and emulated and where one becomes a legend after death, isn't that a life that we all aspire for? Even you, when you left La Mancha, wasn't this your end objective? Without society, we are just another one of the animal species. With it, and only with it, do we become human. All that what marks us separate, our ethics, aesthetics, our will to money, power and excellence, our understanding of satisfaction and fulfillment, even our deep rationality, these are all really fruits of our society. In a way, society already extends us, Senor, I am just trying to bring it up a notch — now that AI rules the roost, only such a system will allow us our humanity back."

"I haven't yet understood what you are driving at, Carl. Agreed that society is much more, agreed that society extends us, but how does any of this point to a collective? Whatever you said, from ethics to excellence, it is already

there — then why this move towards collectivism at all? It is AI which is the problem, not our system. Why change our basic way of life when the problem lies elsewhere?”

“Because there is no fulfillment in an individualistic system, Senor. You look through history, and all you will see are people living unsatisfied and unfulfilled lives. Lives where one isn’t happy about their current situation, but really don’t know the way out. Lives steeped in disappointments, regrets and resentment. If such a high percentage of people live such deeply unsatisfying lives, it absolutely must be a problem with the system itself, Senor. We are all behind societal rewards, our character chiseled out by our habits and desires. One understands money as a societal reward, and later comes to love money itself. One loves the respect gained by being truthful, and later comes to love truth itself. One works for these rewards, but then gets surprised when he doesn’t find the promised deep fulfillment. He doesn’t understand that it is a problem with the system itself, that it is his individualistic nature which stops the society from being an extension of his self, that without it, nothing, absolutely nothing will give him deep satisfaction. You see, Senor, satisfaction is found in the deep meaning that the society brings to your life, and an individualistic system robs you of that.”

“In an individualistic system, the only path to real happiness is then to look deep within oneself, right?”

“That is *not* a good thing, Senor. When one has to turn

to oneself to find real happiness, it just shows that the social structure is not doing its job. Society provides us the framework on which we understand our motivations and happiness, and when it turns out that they don't coincide, what it shows to us is that it is the framework itself which is at fault. Looking deep within us, discarding our desires, all these are then just coping strategies to handle the faulty construct that is our society. That is also why these coping strategies are so extremely difficult, since we are forcing ourselves away from the socially understood motivations and fulfillment, in the hope of finding ever lasting happiness. No, Senor, the system is nowhere near good enough. In a good system, it would be very different. There, a life of deep satisfaction will be available to everyone, without much effort, without any coping strategies. There, the socially understood motivations itself should provide one with deep fulfillment and happiness, Senor"

"Individualism might exacerbate it, sure, but whatever you are saying is true for every society till now. There has to be something deeper here — why specifically focus on individualism, then?"

"Because it is where it is most prevalent, where it starts and spreads, that is why. I have always felt that individuality is antagonistic to sociality on the long run. That the basic tenet of individualism, freedom from coercion, itself has the seed of asociality built into it. One who is on the lookout for coercion would not want to be dependent on anyone, and without dependence, how can

any long lasting relationship form and prosper? And without strong relationships, how can there be real meaning, how can we have real fulfillment and satisfaction in our lives?"

"Wait, Carl, I am a bit confused. Being wary of coercion surely has nothing to do with say, my relation with my neighbors and the society? Am I missing something here?"

"Consider what all freedom from coercion implies, Senor. What it also says is that you are a single individual, whose decisions and actions are your own. That, you alone are responsible for your actions. Your worth, then, is measured by your individual achievements — not that of your family, not that of your tribe, it is you, the individual you, whose achievements matter. In such a society, dependence is a negative, something which takes the gloss out of your achievements. A self-made man thus is held at a higher esteem to one who improved on his inheritance. The concept of independence thus becomes ingrained in the psyche, deep in our subconscious. So much so that we end up being wary of all sort of dependencies. And that can be seen everywhere, in our every decision and action. The way we keep our parents at an arms length. The way we stopped interacting with strangers. And the way we started distancing ourselves from our neighbors. Life is so complicated that any overarching motto will have incidental effects, Senor."

"Including the loss of our social identity."

"Especially the loss of social identity. When everyone keeps everyone else at an arms length, you cannot call it a proper society, right? Instead, what we have there is a group of individuals, each looking out only for himself, tolerating others only for their individual safety and comfort. You do see where it is going, don't you? This is nothing but society as a contract, a society at its most basic, a society that we end up with when not enough effort is spent building it. How can we have a real social identity in such a system? Social identity requires deep social relationships, which is close to impossible in a society where dependence is frowned upon. Without a social identity, without deep connections, we shouldn't be surprised when happiness and socially understood motivations doesn't coincide, Senor."

"These are all very valid points, but there is something missing still, Carl. If you take any society, including non-individualistic societies, they all have this same problem, don't they? When every king wants to rule over the known world, when every scribe wants a Nobel, when every merchant dreams of unlimited wealth, it means that the problem is universal, and not just limited to individualist societies. The way I see it, the real issue lies much deeper, and is ingrained the concept of success itself. It is the very nature of success that breeds alienation and loss of social identity, what makes it impossible for anyone to be ever fully satisfied. Your point about lack of social cohesion, it is all true, but if the fault lies deeper, if the finger points at the very concept of success, then your

fix wouldn't work, right?"

"Our concept of success itself is faulty? Isn't that quite a claim, Don Alonso?"

"Hear me out, Carl. A successful person is, by definition, someone who is outside the average, someone on the fringes of the society. For such a person, his identification with his community will be less compared to others, his success differentiating him from everyone else. While his understanding of happiness and satisfaction remains unchanged, being impressed upon him during his formative years, his loss of social identity means that he is unable to achieve the happiness he would have expected from his success. As he tries harder, trying to reach that elusive happiness by achieving more and more success, he finds it always a bit further ahead, always out of reach, but close enough to feel the temptation. He doesn't realize that the more successful he is, the farther he has to reach out for his happiness, since his society is even less an extension to him now than earlier. In short, happiness is unachievable not because of any individual faults in us, rather it is due to an inherent design flaw at the core of the system."

"I understand what you are saying, but I really do have my doubts, Senor. These aren't new age concepts, these are concepts which has been with us from the start of civilization, maybe even before that. Anything so fundamentally broken wouldn't have survived so long and in so many different cultures, would it?"

“You misunderstood me, Carl. When I said the system was broken, it was purely from an individual satisfaction point of view. From a societal standpoint, it is nowhere near broken; rather it is amongst the most efficient, and thus would have been selected for, rather than against. This concept of success, this artful dream-merchant, gets people to put in their effort all through their lives, and never rest on their laurels, thereby maximizing the efficiency of its resources. From a social point of view, it really does a good job. The problem is only at an individual level, where lack of fulfillment causes deep unhappiness and unstoppable ambition in equal measure.”

“Which can be bad for the society in the long run, isn’t it?”

“Yes, a bit, not as much as you think though. We cope. Some get out of this rat race, some fight even harder, some look out for a life after death and some eschew all desire. There are many though, who resign to their fate, and of the remaining - only a few, who really gets what’s at stake. But consider what the society gets in return. With no one ever fully satisfied, it now runs at peak efficiency. Even more important for the growth of society, the most successful people tend to be the most ambitious, their almost complete alienation relentlessly driving them forward. Is it any wonder that such a society, with its almost perfect efficiency and unbound ambition, has taken over everywhere?”

“It looks a nice enough theory, Senor, no doubt, but do we really lose our social identity when we become successful? Shouldn’t it be the opposite, rather, since we are talked about more in the community?”

“No, Carl. What I meant in this context by social identity is how one identifies himself with the society around him, not the other way around. How much the society talks about him doesn’t matter much there. The whole transformation is all internal, and the way it happens is rather insidious. See, one might start with the motivation, say, of being a scholar, with the end idea of being happy and respected in the community. But, as his knowledge grows, his perception of his community changes. His view of others are now a bit more condescending, a bit more plebeian. He now has lesser respect for them, and most importantly, their respect is no longer good enough for him. Their respect now doesn’t give him the satisfaction he was looking for, he wants more, he now want respect from other scholars. He doesn’t understand that it was he who has changed and that it is his lack of social identity which is affecting his feeling of fulfillment. He doesn’t understand that this whole cycle will repeat again with the next group he gets into and then the next. He doesn’t understand, Carl, that his is a never ending quest.”

“What you say makes sense, Senor, but I don’t know, I somehow cannot connect to it. I still want that life which I said earlier, a life where I am admired and envied, where,

after death, I become a legend. Maybe my satisfaction will be less than what I expect now, but I still want this, a lot.”

“Oh, no, this wasn’t at all about stopping our aspirations, Carl. That would be against our motivations, and so isn’t going to work out. I was just saying that there is a problem with our concept of success, that there is a seed of alienation built deep into it, which, unless you are very careful, will lead to lifelong unhappiness and dissatisfaction. I was just stating a problem, Carl, so that we can find a solution to it.”

“When respect from others can itself make us lose value of that respect, there is not much one can do, right? What about being humble? Would that work, Senor? Pride obviously cannot be stopped from forming, but if there is a layer of humility above it, a thick layer inculcated from childhood, then wouldn’t it stop us from thinking low about others, stopping the alienation from happening altogether? And that hidden layer of pride and self-worth can stay absolutely happy with all the admiration and adulations. How does this look, Senor? Both pride and humility working together to achieve fulfillment.”

“Don’t underestimate the alienating capability of success, Carl. It takes quite an effort to be humble. One problem with your idea is that humility and pride are contradictory concepts, difficult to bring together. If one is truly humble, it means he considers his work to be nothing out of the ordinary, any respect gained on that work considered as misplaced and unwanted. Any

happiness gained there would then be tinged with guilt, not really the happiness of a successful life, Carl. The biggest worry though is that this is just another of the coping strategies, one which is bound to fail some time. What you are suggesting is a tug-of-war with advantage on the side of pride, and at some point of time, pride will win through. There is something deeper here which we are missing, Carl, this cannot be the solution. This is anyways an age-old issue, let's not worry about it. Who knows, maybe your close knit collective will turn out to be the answer, eh?"

"Wouldn't strong social attachments counteract this alienation of success? And in a close-knit society the attachments will be especially strong, right? It actually might work out, Senor."

"Oh! I was being facetious when I said that, Carl, but yeah, it does look like it. Now I am *really* interested — what are your plans? How are you planning to get back our humanity?"

"Remember yesterday, Senor Alonso, when Sancho came up with a plan to provide jobs to everyone."

"Yeah! A somewhat impractical plan, as I remember it."

"Yeah! And our points then were all valid. There was no way out of it at all. But, yesterday night I started thinking. The whole problem essentially boils down to lack of scarcity, right? So, suppose we regulate it - we

regulate what is available and what is not. We remove Bea, we remove Dina, we remove the whole concept of artificial intelligence. It doesn't matter that there are infinite resources outside — inside our society, everything will have limits. We will move from imaginary scarcity to real scarcity, scarcity brought about by regulations and controls, scarcity which people will accept because it is a close-knit collective. No more unlimited resources, no more AI, a world where humans matter, as it was always, Señor."

"All through the ages, we tried to remove scarcity from our lives, to somehow reach Utopia. At last we reach it, and now we want to run away from it? This really will need a deep cooperation between us, Carl, as you said, a close-knit collective. But, is there no other way, some middle path, instead of leaving it completely?"

"I have thought about this a lot. There is no other way out than this. We are all philosophical children of Adam and Eve, and as such we are fundamentally at odds with living in an Utopia. Think about it, Señor — an Utopia, by it's very definition, tries to remove misery and sorrow from our lives. But a life without its trials and tribulations is just a poor imitation of one. Without having desire, how can you dream? Without knowing fear, how can you be brave? Without understanding envy, how can you have satisfaction? Adam ate the apple on purpose, Señor. Humanity is too interlinked with scarcity for him to do otherwise."

“It does look like it, right? Have you thought about how you will achieve your collective, Carl? Get some initial help from Bea, maybe?”

“I have already thought of a few ideas, so, no Bea, at least, not now. One thing I really want to avoid is the preponderance of money, Senor. We cannot have one thing valued over all the other aspects of a society. Ethics, relations, strength, courage, wisdom, hard work, all of them are required for a collective society to function, and valuing something above all these will end up in individualism all over again. It might not be practical, but if you ask me, all aspects should be valued equally, our rationality shouldn’t usurp our physicality, our tools and innovations shouldn’t devalue our relations, everything, courage, hard work, money, power, ethics, everything considered at the same level, Senor.”

“Maybe it is just the nature of things, Carl. Society cannot function without economics or leadership. Everything else might be just good to have, and so is worth far less. That is why you can’t really temper the power of money — it is just too important. I would even say it is futile to fight it. Religion, with all its fear and trembling couldn’t do it, what makes you think you will fare any better? And since ethics and relations are usually antithetical to the drive for power and money, you know where that fight will end up. It is just the reality, Carl. There is no escaping it.”

“I don’t know, Don Alonso. Ethics comes out as

antithetical to money only because we aren't giving ethics its due. See Senor, an innately ethical system has a very liberating characteristic; it allows you to believe others. This means that you escape the greatest destroyer of productivity of them all, negativity. One spends far less time second guessing and outmaneuvering others. It allows for a leaner and efficient leadership and bureaucracy. It allows for an open environment, where ideas and innovations can be freely discussed, where litigations are lesser and contracts are smaller, where companies run far smoother. It allows for a safer environment and lesser policing, where intrusion from state is far lower. The whole life becomes easier, Senor — even making money becomes easier. Don't you see, these aren't antagonistic concepts — just that we have focused on one too much to the detriment of both. The problem, deep down, is that money is positively reinforced while ethics is not, Senor. Ethics, once we outgrow our childhood, is usually about courts of law, and policemen, and not getting caught, everything negative, while money is associated with happiness, safety, and respect, all of it positive. In our mind, money now gets linked to happiness while ethics is connected to avoidance of pain. How can it compete in such a system? Negative reinforcement works only up to a limit, and beyond that, one just sidesteps the whole system altogether. No, Senor, unless we give ethics the same societal importance as money, we will always find ourselves in this same deep hole."

"What you are saying is all true, but there is more to it

than you think. While the reward for ethics is respect, the reward for money is both respect and safety. That is the reason they aren't equal in our society, Carl. Your system might all start equal, but once you hit a period of real scarcity, the safety of assets will come to front, and the society will tilt more to money again. This is a fundamental problem, Carl, and you cannot fix this by legislation."

"Oh! I was not thinking that, Don Alonso. What you were saying earlier was correct, we *are* missing something deep here. That said, this makes me root for a close-knit collective even more. The only way ethics will work is if the level of respect is very high, and it can't happen in an individualist system, right? There, the desire for independence is so ingrained in the psyche, even respecting others will trigger thoughts of dependency. There are few heroes in such a system, Senor, the irony being that everyone wants to be a hero there. Anyways, the only chance, then, is if the society is a close-knit collective, where the power of respect can hold off the advantages of money. As you said, there is no escape if real scarcity hits, but that level of scarcity is rare nowadays, so maybe there is still hope, Senor."

"So, if I understand you correctly, your system is going to be primarily respect based? Does that mean your system will also ditch equality?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet, Senor. There are two options in front of me — one is to extend what worked

earlier, a democratic market driven system, but where a lot of options are available only if one is absolutely ethical, helpful, friendly and open to scrutiny. That should bring ethics and relations out to front, making it positively reinforced, without shaking up the whole system. If this works out, society should run smooth, and since the feedback is negative unlike in a money based system, it would even be stable, the only negative being that it will not be a close-knit society. There won't be any real respect, and lack of meaning and individual alienation will still be there. The second option is to make it fully respect based — from priority in queues to consideration in the courts, from seating arrangements to holding offices, everything based on ones esteem. Here again, one has to be absolutely ethical, nice and open to be even considered, and there has to be lots of legislations to make sure that it doesn't devolve into feudalism, but you got the picture, right? It will be a system based on relationships, ethics and merit, a system quite Confucian, but with a lot more focus on relationships, openness and friendliness than to propriety, a system more close-knit than the first option, Senor."

"Your second option does have the danger of power centers forming, Carl. That said, one advantage I see for both your systems is that by explicitly favoring an omnipresent quality rather than money or power, they might actually end up more equitable than any society that we had till now. A system based on ethics is a double edged sword, though. The feedback there is negative, so yes, it is going to be inherently stable. But, there is also the

possibility of it hampering individual initiative and happiness — especially if ethics is not defined well. It is going to be a delicate balancing act, Carl.”

“Yeah, I know, Senor. I have been sweating over whether to include traditions for this very same reason. While it helps cement concepts, even bringing back wonder and awe in the eyes of kids, it does have a penchant for dogmatism, which I am not really fond of. I want the system to be lenient and forgiving, to understand that people do make mistakes, and I am not sure whether including traditions is going to risk all that.”

“That is going to happen anyway, isn’t it? It is in our nature to be intolerant of others imperfections. When we are old, we forget our youth, when we are seasoned, we forget our naivete, we chafe at the mistakes of others, not realizing that it very well could have been us in the dock, many times we even mistake luck for ability. The worst part is, it changes us, it makes us hide our own imperfections, making us less friendly and trusting, and we end up strict and morose, all because we want to put forward our best face to others. It is not traditions which are at fault here, Carl, it is us, it is our own insecurity. I would rather say that if you can bring in traditions without bound rules, traditions so old and vast that for every action there is always some justification, something similar to the older Hindu traditions, it actually might help bring in a bit of leniency and tolerance. Otherwise, your system is going to lose it’s leniency over time, Carl, there is no escaping that. You just have to look at our court

system to see how it happens. Courts all start pretty lenient, but it never stays that way. There will always be some crimes whose effects or cruelty are above the average, and in a bid to provide justice to those crimes, the courts will become more and more hardened over time. There will also be periods where we would want to be tough on crime, and those legislations also will contribute to this hardening process. That is just the way it is, Carl, I don't think our traditions should be blamed for it."

"I don't think it would be a big issue in the new system, Senor. We put our best face forward because we are afraid of being judged, because others would use our weakness against us. Would that be still a problem here, since the primary focus is on openness, friendliness and ethics? Still, your underlying point is valid — traditions, if chosen wisely, can only help. What you said about courts though, it has me worried, Senor. Is there a solution to it? Suppose we have a statistical court, would that be of help? If we setup a court whose job is not to ascertain guilt, rather to provide harsher sentences to a small percentage of already decided cases — sentences which are not allowed in the normal courts — then justice can be provided for the more difficult scenarios without legislation creeping in and decreasing the leniency, right? Even if we want to get tough on crime, it is just a matter of increasing this percentage for a period of time — this would allow the court system to stand independent of legislature, even in difficult times, wouldn't it?"

"Not a bad idea, Carl. Understand that everything will

have outliers and handle them separately... Ah! Is that the lunch gong?"

It was, and they soon saw Sancho coming over, looking for them. They then split up for their meal, Carl wanting the privacy of his cube, Don and Sancho preferring the open garden. After lunch, it was time for siesta, and Don, tired from all these discussions, quickly fell asleep. Carl didn't come out after lunch, Don also pretty sluggish, and that day ended in stupor, without much to report further on.

CHAPTER TEN

Next Steps

There was another surprise in store for Don Alonso next morning. Carl came to his cube all packed and ready, and announced that he was starting for the revolution straightaway. Sancho and Don Alonso tried to calm him down, reason with him, but Carl was adamant. He has thought long and hard before making this decision, and this time, there is no going back. Once Don Alonso understood that Carl is in it for real, he relented, and giving him his blessings, bid him adieu. Carl too, after a loving hug to Sancho, wished success on Don's quest, again reminding him to go and meet Adi. He then got into the waiting taxi and took off, his first steps towards a new life, the first steps towards reality.

Next few days were of deep contemplation for Don Alonso. Success, as he envisaged it, seemed out of reach. Business, invention, art, culture, nothing felt meaningful anymore. In this world of make-believe, is there anything fulfilling at all? He toyed briefly with the idea of following Carl's footsteps, to come up with a new social system that

works. Maybe something even beyond Carl, a system that doesn't fight the status quo, something that works well in it's current confines. Since our most fundamental loss has been our ability to compete, maybe a system that doesn't care about competing, where fulfillment is available through some other means.

He dismissed the idea soon enough though. His discussions with Carl has already shown him the difficulty of fighting deep rooted motivations, and was there anything more deeply rooted than our urge to compete? Furthermore, howsoever he tried, he couldn't come up with a good solution, nothing which really works, nothing really fulfilling. After some more time of this wasted effort, as usual, he fell into a deep despair.

Sancho though was at his usual ebullient self. He was enjoying this incredible adventure, having a blast, doing something really fun, meeting new people, brilliant people, everything now viewed in a different light, absolutely happy, absolutely content. What if there are setbacks? Don will never ever quit, he always comes back stronger, just have to give him time. And what if there really is no solution, if nothing at all comes out of it in the end? That also doesn't matter, it isn't as if they had much to do at home anyways. The only thing to do now was to pull Don Alonso out of this depression.

That anyways was never going to be a difficult feat. So used to disappointments was he now that it took just a good night's sleep to drain off his melancholic humor. By

lunchtime next day, and with a bit of extra help from Sancho's drollery, Don Alonso was mostly back to his normal self. After some days recovering and enjoying the hospitalities of Bea, they then decided to leave Bethlem and seek out Ad.

Finding Ad, or Adi as he is variously known, turned out to be quite a difficult process. Their initial search came up empty, so they had to turn to Dina for help. She also couldn't locate Adi anywhere inside Utopai, so she contacted Janus for a more detailed search, both inside and outside Utopai. Janus knew, but wasn't willing to disclose the location until he got a go-ahead from Adi, so it took a further few days of back-and-forth before an approval was obtained. Anyways, in the end, they were told that Adi was living all alone, deep inside the forest outside Utopai.

This was a rather unexpected development. Both Don and Sancho had never gone outside of Utopai. Very few people ever did, and even they were mostly restricted to the safe zone - where they could at least carry weapons and safety gear. But Adi was in the forest proper, and that, that was a whole different ball game. Death and danger roamed there free, and with no trappings of civilization allowed, no knife, no weapons, no implants, not even the pain-threshold implant, entering that vast forest, the world outside Utopai, was a terrifying proposition.

Not everything was bad though. Being less than the

maximum allowed group size of three, they didn't have to split up. Moreover, Janus seemed to be rather sympathetic to Adi's guests, so they were allowed few luxuries - a vehicle drop till the outer edge of the safe zone, detailed instructions, a survival kit, a horse and a mule for the remaining travel, even an extra horse in case they need it.

These admittedly small favors didn't do much to improve Sancho's mood though. He baulked at the prospect of this jungle adventure and tried to talk Don Alonso out of it, pleading, caviling, cajoling, but all to no avail. Don had no intention of backing out anymore. He was by now fascinated by Ad — here was someone willing to risk his life by living in the deep jungle, someone courageous enough to escape this life of pretense and make-believe, someone he has to meet for sure.

The discussion went on for some time, and as usual, it was Don Alonso who prevailed. He regaled Sancho with stories of explorers and explorations, the joy of travel, the adrenalin rush, fear, real fear, real emotions, memories, lovely lovely memories, amazing stories, awestruck crowds, the satisfaction. And most importantly, they also get to meet Ad; Wasn't Carl utterly impressed by him? Living alone, like an ascetic, that isn't easy, is it? *That* is something he, Don Alonso, can never do; his concept of self is so closely intertwined with society, such a lonely life is unthinkable. Wouldn't it be nice to meet someone so different in his views?

Sancho had resigned to his fate by then. No use talking

to Don Alonso in this mood, and anyways, his points did make sense. It might be fun after all, it is surely going to be an experience to remember, only that they should be still there to remember it later. So, once they reached the edge, Sancho took the lead, got on the mule and started off. Don Alonso hurriedly thanked everyone for their help and took off after Sancho, catching up with him just as he was entering the forest, their journey now entering a new phase.

Sancho's worries weren't unfounded though, and the actual reality of a jungle expedition turned out to be a far cry from their dreams and expectations. The route was a tortuous one, and as they were not used to the rigors of travel, their journey was littered with frequent stops and snack breaks. By evening, they had lost their bearings completely, and wandering around for some more time, they were close to panicking by the time night rolled in.

The fear and panic of the day though paled in comparison with the absolute terror that was night. Rustling sounds and moving shadows kept them awake, the mortal fear of the dangerous unknown leaving them in cold sweat. Sancho, especially, was in complete panic, every passing hour bringing him closer and closer to a nervous breakdown. By midnight, Don Alonso was fast asleep, but Sancho, every breeze and every rustle had him shaking and shivering, scared to move, scared to open his eyes, scared out of his mind. Every breaking twig was a beast attacking, every moving shadow an apparition, every sound felt closer than the last and when he heard

rustling of their bags, he knew, for the first time in life, what fear, real fear, was.

He completely froze up, fear swamping out every thought and action, fear at an intensity he never imagined possible. He lay there, absolutely terrified, eyes squeezed shut, not moving a muscle - lay there, until silence, sweet sweet silence, somehow managed to wriggle in amongst the crowd of emotions and told him that danger has passed, that danger was never there. He was so overcome with relief once he was sure of his safety that he started giggling, laughing, guffawing, until his sides ached and belly cramped. He understood now, for the first time really, what courage meant, what real emotions meant, what difference such an experience makes, what, really, they were missing in Utopai. Thereafter he heard no rustling or crackling, saw no moving shadows, the forest itself went into a deep torpor, and he, with a smile in his lips, fell into a deep and satisfying sleep.

Next morning started propitiously, as they soon stumbled upon an alternate route which was well marked on their map, a route they had completely missed earlier. The new route turned out to be a much better choice — it was a well beaten path, and while it looked very recently made, it had many watering holes on the way where they could rest and their beasts could graze, and the path had no crossroads whatsoever where they could get lost again. By the mid third day they reached Adi's hut, and it was a measure of how well they enjoyed their journey that they were almost sad to see it end.

Utopai

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Adi

Adi was tending to his vegetable patch when he heard their footsteps by the outer fence. He came running out, and with a lovely welcome, got everyone settled in. After some pleasantries and a nice lunch of salad, fruits and honey, they settled down for some chit-chat. Stomach full, tired from their excursions and a warm gentle breeze coursing over them, Don and Sancho soon fell into a deep sleep. Seeing them snoring peacefully, Adi, eyes twinkling after hearing their stories, with a small smile playing on his lips, went back to his vegetable patch.

Don Alonso woke up by about mid-afternoon, and after freshening up at the stream, joined Adi at the patch. Neither of them being great conversationalists, it was a bit awkward at first, but once the initial ice was broken, Adi turned out to be quite a character, always happy, lover of all things beautiful, a person of eternal optimism and camaraderie. While not the most chatty, he was nevertheless very genial, very witty, a fun loving, selfless young chap — pretty much the opposite of the serious

scholarly figure Don had in mind.

Their discussion turned to more serious matters, and Don Alonso soon saw why Carl was so impressed with this young man.

“Why am I here? Rather difficult question to answer, Senor Alonso. I guess it was to experience life in the raw, to see life outside the veil of society, to be one with nature and God. But it is never ever a single reason, right? There was also the thrill of adventure, the invincibility of youth, and many others, some which I know and many which I don’t. Mainly though, it was about understanding who I really was, to see whether I will change based on this understanding.”

“And, did you?”

“Oh, yes. A lot. Knowing that one can be tiger food anytime really does change ones perspective, Senor. It brought home, in absolute clarity, that my existence is only thanks to my social support structure. It is not any new revelation obviously, but it was never this clear to me. This understanding that I don’t have an existence as an individual, that I am just a part of a bigger being, it really changed the way I look at things, Senor.”

“You survived alone for months, Ad, without any support. Why would you then think social support is ever required?”

“Ha! Do you think I would have lasted a week without Janus keeping an eye on me? The same way she helped you when you got lost, she has been helping me too. Know Senor, that there is very little luck in the jungle.”

“Oh!”

“Oh, indeed.”, said Adi, smiling at Don’s surprise, “Anyways, things start looking very different once you realize that there is no individual existence, that there is no self, Senor. Life then is no longer about you, rather the group now becomes paramount, and once this understanding really seeps in, it changes you completely. You see everything for what it is — ego, unhappiness, individual desires, all of them you see as misguided concepts, misguided because we don’t understand there is no self.”

“I have no problem with your initial assertion — about us having no existence outside our social structure. But from that to reach a conclusion that there is no individual self whatsoever? That is quite a jump, isn’t it? I am also a person who thinks of everything in terms of social identity, but *this*, this is a bridge too far, even for me, Ad. Why, I have my individual self. That’s my identity, that’s my consciousness, that’s *me*. How can you say that it doesn’t exist?”

“You have an individual self because you lived your life in Utopai, Senor. What manifests as self is nothing but your area of influence — what you can consistently

influence, and what you can be consistently influenced by. Obviously, that includes the physical and mental *you*, but it can be much more, Senor. If you were in a small social group, your area of influence would be much bigger — the whole group respond to you, and you can also influence everyone, so your area of influence includes your group, your self now expands to your whole group. The problem starts when the group becomes big, Senor. There, the system is so huge, individual mindsets so diverse, that the only influence you have is on you, the physical, mental *you*, and your self now becomes what you said, *you*. This is a neotenic concept, you are growing up to become a kid again, and it is just because the system is far too big and disparate.”

“How do you ... I can’t wrap my head around this, Ad.”

“It isn’t complicated, Senor. Such a constricted self happens first at your infancy, when your area of influence ends with you. Once you enter your teens, you slowly supplant it with your group consciousness — and this is something that never happens in a large society, because a big society doesn’t need you that much. This causes your groups interests and your interests to diverge, deepening the split, restricting your self even more to the individual you. You are not moving forward in your teens in a big society, Senor, rather you are getting forced back to your infancy.”

Adi stopped, letting it sink in, then took a sip of water

and continued...

“Think how you would live in a small social group, Senor, the way we earlier lived — born in the wild, reared in the wild, trying to survive in the wild, knowing no one else, your group your whole world. You cannot survive there as an individual, ever! And your group needs you in the same exact way — the group also wouldn’t survive without you. When you and your group depend so much on each other for survival, you become thoroughly, completely invested in your group, and your group become thoroughly, completely invested in you. Your group’s happiness becomes your happiness, your group’s success becomes your success, your group’s desire becomes your desire. Your area of influence includes your group, your self expands to include your group. Your thoughts, decisions, happiness, desires, everything is in behalf of your group — none of it is ever about you — there is no *you*. Your individual self, as a separate entity, ceases to exist. You become part of your group, in the most absolute sense, Senor.”

“How so, Ad? Inside the social group, I still exist as an individual, right?”

“Oh yes. You do. And you have your own individuality, personality and thought process — there is no denying that — it is even required for the success of your group. But when all your thoughts and decisions and desires are about the group, where does your self end and where does the group begin? We become one with the

group, neither having a chance without the other, and losing that oneness is behind many of our issues, Senor”

“Is that why... Oh! That’s why fulfillment is unattainable!”

“At last you get it”, said Adi, smiling, “This is why individual achievements cannot give us absolute fulfillment. We are not wired that way. Once we understand that we aren’t yet ready for our individual selves, a lot of our issues — lack of fulfillment, unethical behaviors, crime, unhealthy competition, many of these will go away... Ah! Sancho, up at last!”

Sancho had woken up from his nap, and was looking around for Don Alonso. He came over to them, and being Sancho, soon took over the discussion. He was quite curious about the life in the wild, the different dangers, the house, the food he eats, everything. Adi was an accommodating host and he showed them around, explaining everything to the minutest detail.

It was a lovely place. The house itself was a tiled roof hut, rather small, three rooms, one single door opening to the courtyard. The yard was a pretty sight - a master kiln, two vegetable gardens, a rather formidable fence, two standalone rooms, one to store pots and tiles, the other to cure foods, all in all, an efficient and impressive system.

All these piqued Sancho’s curiosity further, and was soon showering Ad with questions. Did Ad learn these

survival skills before leaving Utopai or did he learn them here? Did he leave Utopai to write a book or something? What did his family say about him leaving for the jungle? Does he miss anything from Utopai?

“Salt, dear Sancho, salt”, Ad was laughing, “There is nothing that I miss as much. And nobody goes to jungle to write books, Sancho. There is almost no free time here. It is all about daily chores — foraging, gardening, housekeeping. By evening, I don’t want to do anything but sleep, have a good dinner and sleep.”

Sancho and Adi quickly became good friends, and they were together the whole day, trying out different contraptions, collecting honey, manning the kiln, chatting throughout. Don Alonso was deep in thought though, doing his chores in complete silence, completely preoccupied with this new revelation. This idea by Ad had his mind racing. Things were clearing up thick and fast. What he told Carl was correct then. The concept of success was indeed faulty. It was meant only for small groups. Small enough that your success is intricately linked with your group’s success, where your success does not alienate you, rather brings you closer, since the group is itself an extension of you. But the same concept of success becomes a problem when the society grows large and powerful. So big that it now no longer depends on an individual. So skewed is the power dynamics now, no wonder the concept of self took hold everywhere. And that’s why deep satisfaction is so far away, why society is so fundamentally unfair.

Lying down to sleep, Don was now in a state of feverish excitement. The problem was now fully clear to him. The answer to it was given gift-wrapped by Ad. Interdependency in a small society. That's all. An answer so simple, so elegant, he was still laughing at the way Maya hid it from them all when sleep overtook him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Mind Your Reality

Don Alonso woke up rather late, the exertions of the previous day taking its toll. An idyllic swim and a hearty breakfast later, it was time to help out — Don Alonso taking up housework and gardening, Sancho clearing overgrown bushes, Ad everything else. Between the three, the day's work was done by mid-afternoon, and it was time to idle around, basking in the sun, talking about nothing in particular. The discussion soon turned to the conclusions from yesterday, Don Alonso explaining how the concept of interdependency solves all his problems.

Sancho wasn't impressed though.

"Expanding self, Senor? Our minds don't change this much, do they?"

"It does, Sancho.", said Don Alonso, "It has to. How else can we ever make sense of this world, considering that we start out with a blank slate. It absolutely has to be a process of trial and error, constantly refactoring and

redefining, changing our internal picture every time it differs from the real world, until the image we have is veridical in every form. Without change, our minds will stay the way we were born, wouldn't it?"

"It goes far beyond that, actually.", Ad chimed in, "Change is how our mind works, at its most basic. It underpins everything that we associate with our mind - the way we think, the way we act, how we make decisions, absolutely everything. We are crystallized changes, in a way."

"He is talking about the structure of our mind, Sancho", explained Don Alonso, seeing the incredulous look on Sancho's face, "Do you know how it works?"

"I know it is very complicated, beyond that, no idea, Senor."

"No, it is nothing complicated. Think of it as an elaborate domino show, only that the connections are mostly one to many. Your actions, thoughts, sensations — all these come about from dominoes toppling in specific ways, in specific patterns. Once you understand this, you understand your mind, Sancho."

"I am not getting it, Senor. What has dominoes to do with how I think?"

"I am not talking about real dominoes.", said Don Alonso, laughing, "What I meant was that sapience is

nothing unusual in a system with many interconnected elements. Complicated behaviors arise easily and naturally in such systems, without any external intervention. If you consider mind as a central hub in a domino show, long branches of dominoes going in every direction, then, sensations can be viewed as dominoes toppling inward from extremities, actions as them toppling outwards. And if there is a connection between these two rows, what you get is an action associated with a sensation. You touch a hot pan, you pull your hand away. A set of dominoes fall inward, a connection happens somewhere, another set of dominoes fall outward. That's it. No calculations, no complexities, just falling dominoes. You see how simple it is?"

"Oh! These connections, then, are our thoughts?"

"Not exactly. Connections are stored information, but the rows of dominoes are what does something with this information. We need both in equal measure. Connections to store information and the falling rows to process it and come to decisions. Your thoughts then — are not just connections, Sancho. It is the result of dominoes processing information stored in the connections."

"The falling rows do much more than just carry information around, Sancho", Ad also joined the conversation, "You have seen how dominoes fall, right? The rows don't topple in a straight line forever. They sometimes split up, the same sensation going to different areas of the mind. Or they might merge together, ending

up as a single row. You have to understand the importance of these, Sancho. Two rows merging is two sensations linking, and any action by the outgoing row now becomes a calculated action based on the two inputs. Do you get it? You are making complex decisions, considering many different factors, with nothing but merging rows here."

"Wait, Ad, what calculation are you talking about? The rows are joining together, I understand that, but, I can't see any calculation there. Am I missing something?"

"Think about how dominoes merge, Sancho. Different rows will come in from different angles, and the merged row stays put or falls based on the effect of all the rows. One single row might not have the strength to topple the merged domino, but when other rows also fall, the result is different. You understand how it works now? You hear a rattle, and see a movement, you pull your foot back. Two separate sensations, neither alone capable of reaching the threshold. But together, when both their impacts are summed up, it starts off an action row."

"Only if the angle isn't too big, Ad", said Don Alonso

"Yeah, Senor, only if the angle between them isn't large. Otherwise, instead of supporting, the rows oppose each other. Instead of association, it becomes now comparison, where the relative strength of the rows decide whether or not the merged row falls. Comparison, summation, all your calculations are just this, Sancho."

“And not just reflexive behaviors, Sancho”, said Don Alonso, “Non-reflexive is just the same, only that here the action rows are driven primarily by internal sensations. An external impulse might be the trigger, but it’s job ends there, at starting off the internal rows. After that, it is pretty much the same thing, lots of interactions between internal rows, ending at some or the other action row.”

“I can’t understand this — I really can’t!”, said Sancho, flustered, “Doing something after rational thought is a world away from pulling hands from a hot pan, isn’t it? How can falling dominoes understand what someone is asking me to do? And *that*, that is just the initial step. There is a whole lot of thinking, judging and decision making to do after that, before any action is taken. I really don’t understand how falling dominoes can do all these, Senor Alonso”

“It is because you are looking at mind as a linear system, Sancho. Actually, only reflexive actions are anywhere near linear — everything else runs in cycles, the past defining the present, the present defining the future. What you consider as judging and decisioning is just multiple rounds of toppling rows, merging, splitting, every round modified by the previous round of analysis, until all the strong connections are toppled and analyzed, Sancho”

“You will have to tell about how information is stored in our mind, Senor Alonso. Sancho wouldn’t understand

this otherwise.”

“I should have started with that, true. See, Sancho, information is not a standalone entity. Every piece of data exists only in relation to all its associations. So, when someone asks you to, say, lift your hands, you don’t just hear the word lift, you instead hear every relation, every association you had with the concept of *lift*. Do you understand the meaning of it, Sancho? Not just the dominoes for lifting the hands get triggered when you hear the word lift. Every associated domino — emotions, meanings, action rows — also gets triggered along with it.”

“OK... But, how would I choose which trigger to consider then?”

“You don’t choose, Sancho. Your past sensations define it for you. If you see your friend stopping his car and coming out, all the associations related to driving would get triggered immediately. All the triggered rows will be swaying left and right, primed and ready to tip over at a little push. If your friend now says the word *lift*, the chance of it toppling the already swaying meaning of car ride is much higher than, say, the steadier dominoes of lifting something. You get it now, Sancho? It is not just external sensations that drives your mind, context also plays an almost equal role.”

“This is so cool... Context playing the role of partial connections, wow! No wonder we understand cause and

effect. Especially since the context will go away when the dominoes slow down over time. This is amazing, Senor.”

“Yeah, Sancho. You are getting it now. Each falling domino triggers every one of its associations, every single time. If the association is weak, it might not go down straightaway. For it to topple then, it has to be either already in the context, swaying, or the sensation has to be a strong one, like touching a hot pan or being in deep thought. And say it isn’t toppled — then, instead of a new thought, you end up with a modified context. You see how this all works, Sancho? What you should understand is that, *information is relation*. Without relations, there is no information, no meaning. There is no meaning in a single domino, but as part of a circle or a sphere, the meanings start accumulating. It maybe a part of a bigger concept, maybe a ball, maybe a scoop of ice-cream; so, if along with the dominoes of roundness, say the dominoes of bounciness and squishiness also topples, it is now understood as a ball. Do you understand what I was telling you earlier — that, our mind is the simplest of processes running over a sea of stored relations.”

“This is important, Sancho.”, Ad also now joined in, “We only understand relations. We don’t really understand a ball, we have a fuzzy understanding of a bouncy, round, squishy object. Fuzzy because the data received is never exact, and we always work with approximations. Bouncy because you have seen balls bounce, because it now triggers dominoes associated with things that bounce. Round because it triggers dominoes

associated with other round things. Only connections to these properties matter — these properties brings the meaning to us. You wouldn't throw it in your room because it might bounce off and break a window. The meaning of ball as a bouncing object, meaning of window as a breakable object, meaning of repercussions, all together inform your decisions. When Don Alonso said information is relational, this is what he meant, Sancho."

"I get it now, Ad. So, if information itself is relational, the falling patterns of dominoes also will have those relations embedded in, right? If we just link dominoes falling together, wouldn't these connections build itself, somehow?"

"Absolutely, Sancho. This is exactly how our mind builds up the picture of the external world — by strengthening links between dominoes falling together and weakening others. When you see a ball bouncing, the concepts of roundness, bounciness etc are all triggered, and being direct triggers, all these dominoes will topple at about the same time. Maybe you hear the word *ball* also in the same context, so the dominoes associated with the sound of *ball* also now topples. And since links between dominoes falling together are strengthened, a conceptual object forms automatically, a fuzzy object linking bounciness, roundness and the word ball gets created, an abstraction that we understand as a ball, an abstraction which has a meaning, an abstraction which can be used in decisions, Sancho."

“It is actually a lot more powerful than it looks, Sancho”, this was Don Alonso, “Pattern matching, higher level abstractions, separation of essential and incidental properties, all those arise automatically in such a system. And it is easy to understand this if we look at how an incidental property like color is handled. Balls can be in different colors, and so connections between the ball and a specific color is never strengthened. Instead, the strongest connection there will be between the ball and a domino connected to all the colors, because this associated domino will be triggered and strengthened every time we see a ball of a different color. Do you now see how higher level abstractions arise here, Sancho? Maybe he has seen balls of maybe three colors, but now he understands intuitively that the ball can be of any color — because the common color domino is not just connected to those three colors — it is connected to all colors. It might even be connected to words we use in that context, so now we can even talk about it, that *a ball is color agnostic*. This goes even deeper, Sancho, maybe to a level of even explaining skepticism. Had the object had some connection with color, like a leaf and the color green, the strongest connection would be from leaf to a domino connected to all greenish colors. But, there will still be a connection to the common color domino — far weaker than to the color green obviously, because it is a linked connection, but still there, always. Now, every time you think about leaf, this common color domino is also in context, as a skeptical suggestion at the back of the mind pointing out that leaf need not always be green. Do you see the power of it, Sancho?”

“You know what, this is far simpler than I imagined it to be. What about the really complicated area, Senor — innovation? Is that also handled by context?”

“Innovation, causality, all those are handled by context, yes. Original thoughts are just previously unknown connections lighting up, right? This can happen in many ways, Sancho. Maybe two completely unrelated dominoes are brought together by context. Because both of them fell together, that becomes a new idea, a new connection, through which new thoughts and actions starts flowing. That is one possibility. Or maybe there was already a hidden connection, which came out because a deep thought brought down even far away associations. Innovation is not the complex part here, Sancho. Decision making is. How was the decision originally made to pull my hands back from the hot pan? How did we reach the correct decision the first time, before the connections were made and strengthened? This is the complicated part. Do you want to give it a try, Sancho?”

“Don’t know, Senor... By finding the path of the least pain, maybe?”

“Very close, Sancho. Not exactly the least pain — rather, a path where the pain is below a threshold. Driven by pain, every option is tried out — pushing front, pulling back, everything. Since pulling back decreases pain, since those dominoes fell together, those connections now are strengthened — next time you touch a hot pan, your reaction is much faster, because the hot pan, the pain in

touching it, all are now already connected to the action of pulling hands back. You now have a decision which can be reused, Sancho.”

“I was thinking about much more complex decisions, actually. Like, what to do when someone asks me to lift my hands? How do we reach those decisions, Senor?”

“Pain is the driver everywhere, Sancho. Finding a path where the pain is less — every decision is about that. We don’t see it because the pain there is hidden many layers beneath, that’s all. Why would you not lift your hands? Maybe because of your societal standing, right? It then is about respect, which is anyways associated with pain from a very young age. Just three levels down, and you can see pain dominoes rattling due to association. The more you care about something, the higher the pain response, the higher the swaying, the deeper your thought. You see, Sancho, it is just the same as pulling your hands back from a hot pan. Trying out all options until a path of low pain is found and strengthened.”

“To be fair, it is a bit more involved than that”, this was Ad, “There is societal standing to be considered, but that is just one of many, Sancho. Maybe the person asking is a person of authority, maybe you don’t want to put the effort in lifting your hands, maybe you find it morally repugnant not to do as asked — the point is that the pain dominoes will be swaying due to multiple parallel reasons — some of them *for*, some of them *against*. In such a scenario, it is not like you do one thing and the pain goes

away completely, right? Rather, it becomes a compromise of finding a low enough path. Again, this is also not difficult to achieve. It is the same method of trying out all the options, but without the quick solution. One possibility then is that because more and more options are looked at, other connections and associations also come into context, and maybe now the balance changes, and you find an answer straightaway. If an answer is not found still, time will take its course and provide the solution, Sancho. The swaying comes down after some time, the threshold is now easier to overcome, and the same method of trying out all options will come up with a path above the now easier threshold — and we end up with a compromise path, a good enough solution. You getting all of these, Sancho?”

“Oh, yes, absolutely! This is not at all difficult, is it? I was worried when Don Alonso said this was complex”

“The complexity was hidden underneath, Sancho”, said Don Alonso, “We were talking about cycling through different options and paths, right? That cycling mechanism is where the whole complexity lies. There is no end to the possible options, and it would be months before we come up with an answer to even the simplest of problems, Sancho. That said, the solution to this and how it comes about is nothing esoteric — it is the same way we extrapolate from one or two colors to all colors — by means of higher level abstractions. When you pull your hands back from a hot pan, you don’t stop your understanding at that level, you also form higher level

abstractions hinting at deeper meanings. Because you pulled your hands back, because the answer was to do the exact opposite of what you were doing, you *understand* the negation abstraction. If you solve a difficult problem after getting up from a good nights sleep, you *understand* the variation abstraction. You *understand* all these because some common dominoes are hit during every decisioning and over time they start acting as meta decisioning abstractions, abstractions which decide decisioning itself. And the way they work is amazing, Sancho. After trying one set of options, maybe these associations may cause the *negation* dominoes to fall, and since the same negation dominoes are triggered when we learn complementary concepts, now a separate set of dominoes, associated with opposite ideas join the fray. Or maybe the *variation* dominoes fell, and now you start focusing on completely random things to bring new dominoes in the mix. You see, Sancho? Different solutions, complicated solutions, but in the end, all abstracted from a lot of day-to-day experiences.”

“I love this, Senor. What I learn in general, I learn from the specific. Wow! Only thing I am wondering about is why this has to be all about pain? What if happiness also works the same way? If money is connected to things associated with happiness, just getting money itself would trigger those dominoes second hand, wouldn't it? Or, if we praise a kid if he learns something new, wouldn't the pattern of new learning be connected to happiness? That could be why we become happy when we understand a brilliant theory, because, such a theory brings a deeper

understanding to many existing concepts, so the new learning pattern gets triggered again and again across the mind, triggering the happiness dominoes all over. No wonder we become happy then. It could be one reason why we see beauty in both elegance and opulence, why we prefer the original over the derivative, why we are impressed by efficiency, right, Senor? And if new connections can bring happiness, maybe that's one reason we feel sad and hollow when someone dies or leaves us, because there it is about losing connections, and the closer the person is to us, the more the number of connections lost, and the sadder we feel. You know what I love about all this, Don Alonso? That we are talking about our minds, the most complex of systems, our identity, individuality, soul, everything, and it is so, so, simple, so elegant, it feels absolutely amazing, Senor."

"There is lots to be amazed about, in fact.", this was Ad,
 "For me, the biggest amazement is that every single thing we understand is just an abstraction. Not just the objects, all the theories, concepts, emotions, every single thing in the world is a pattern, an abstraction, similar to everything else. Inside, you cannot differentiate between anger or a rock, between theory of gravitation and the taste of a mango. It is a wondrous thing, Sancho. The more you think about these things, the more fun it becomes, actually. Take an abstraction and start splitting it — you know what you will end up with? The same few basic dominoes. Everything else is an abstraction arising out of it. Even time and location are just patterns which work on the same basic dominoes to bring about the abstractions

that we see. Do you understand what it means, Sancho? The world in our mind is built out of few dominoes, few actual dominoes, and everything else is an abstraction on it. I love this, really. What about you, Don Alonso, is there something that has caught your fancy?"

"Me? For me, the concept of self merging to group — that's what took me in. Once you told me about it, Ad, it became all very clear for me. If the minds joining are all similar, with similar perceptions and motivations, it really can join and work as one — not as an abstract concept, rather, really joining, seamlessly, like any other thought in our mind. When a split mind can work as two separate minds, complete in itself, self-sufficient in its thoughts and emotions, why can't two similar minds join as one when there is real connections between them? See, abstractions can stand on its own, it doesn't need the exact same dominoes below to prop it up, and there will be many dominoes taking up similar tasks. This is why minds can split, and this is why minds can join, becoming a bigger mind, self, merging to the group, Ad."

Everyone went very quiet after this, lying on the grass, deep in thought. Not a word came out of them for a very long time, when Adi turned to Don Alonso and said —

"Other than this, I have been chewing on one idea for some time now, Senor. It might be of interest to you — do you want to hear it?"

"Absolutely! After everything Carl has told, I was

waiting for this topic of discussion, Ad"

"Ah! It isn't the most palatable of concepts, but I think you might like it, Senor. I have been thinking — rather, I have this idea that we are all just abstractions inside a mind. A mind quite like ours, falling dominoes, abstractions, everything — forced to be similar because information is relational. A mind where our world exists in its entirety, Senor"

"God, Ad?"

"God, Brahman — depends on what one believes, I guess. I started forming my views once I really understood the domino model, Senor — that it is the simplest way to store self-contained information. From there, it was but a small step to consider the world itself as a domino model — after all, isn't our world the most self-contained of systems?"

Sancho was quite baffled though.

"That is hardly a valid reason, Adi. We can all consider reality to be anything that catches our fancy — that doesn't mean it has to be true, right?"

"He isn't saying that though, is he?", said Don Alonso, "From a purely logical perspective, he cannot be dismissed thus, Sancho. Logic tends to favor elegant solutions, and considering world as pure information — it *does* look elegant, doesn't it? A sea of dominoes, toppling

and flowing as one domino topples the next, abstractions and forces arising naturally from these flows, abstractions changing as flows merge and split, add and subtract, the whole world arising as bubbles from this sea — we should give this idea a chance at least, Sancho. Look at it without bias, without our view of reality clouding our judgment.”

“The world is information, Sancho”, said Adi, “I am looking at it as pure relations, that’s all. Assuming it is true, another way to think of it is as a sea of consciousness, Don Alonso, since dominoes are the basis of the consciousness in us. Once I started thinking this way, what the old sages meant — the world as a projection of consciousness, we the same as Brahman — all of these started making sense to me. The real is the dominoes, the consciousness, and the current world is just Maya, the veil, the projection over it. We are the same as Brahman, because we are just abstractions arising out of Brahman, like waves in a sea — we are part of this consciousness.”

“Or it could be because we also have a mind, right? We are the same as Brahman because our mind has the same falling dominoes and abstractions as Brahman. How does that sound, Ad?”

“I had that same line of thought earlier, but it actually took me to the opposite conclusion, Señor. Because our mind’s abstractions and projections are not available to Brahman, I was initially considering self and Brahman to be separate, disparate objects. But then I understood that

all these incongruities in thinking are because we aren't seeing the whole picture. Our self is both distinct and identical to Brahman — distinct because our mind and the world it creates is fundamentally inaccessible to Brahman, and identical because our self is just an abstraction arising out of Brahman. Different interpretations of the same idea, Don Alonso. And from this angle, the other aspects of Brahman, how it is within us and outside us, how it is fast but doesn't move, all these contradictions now starts making sense, Senor."

"Oh! OK. Anyways my question, comparing us to God, itself was wrong, since Brahman doesn't have memory. Scrub that thought, Adi. I was just..."

"This is one rabbit hole which I don't want to venture too deep into, Don Alonso. There will be no end of debates if we do."

"I wasn't saying anything controversial here, Ad. Maybe my phrasing was wrong. It was just an observation about nature, that nature has no memory. I said Brahman because Brahman is considered to be an unchanging entity, and memory means some sort of change at-least. I should have used the word nature instead, I guess."

"You didn't get it still, Senor. It is not that I have misunderstood. It is that I see hints of memory in Brahman. Fleeting suggestions of stored linkages, suggestions so faint that I myself have trouble believing it, let alone converting others to my view. This is why I don't

want to go down this path, Senor. Who would believe a theory based mostly on our forefathers beliefs? Especially now, when we consider all those beliefs to be asinine and illogical.”

“I don’t consider the beliefs of ancients to be absurd, Ad. I always thought there was something in there. Obviously information was limited then, with science at it’s infancy, but it is scarcely believable that so many people followed these religious scriptures and practices without seeing actual results. There has to be something in those beliefs other than just coincidences and subjective validations — we are just not seeing it. Consider the sages who created those scriptures — extremely intelligent people who spent untold hours of effort creating sacred mantras and occult practices; to consider that they did all these for so long without seeing results significantly different from the normal seems, to me at least, rather unlikely. They wouldn’t have carried on for long — not continue for thousands of years — without real outcomes, would they?”

“I was looking at it from another angle — maybe both are a bit related. I was thinking about the power of Gods, not the power we expect out of the Gods, rather the actual power, the power which people attest to in reality — this power is usually limited in scope and tied to a locality, right? Spirits confined to their own villages, affecting individuals in minor ways. Moreover, this power also seems to manifest most in a small village groups — in a big city, it most often goes missing. In every village, every

settlement, there are hundreds of such stories — these cannot be all fictitious, Senor. There has to be some truth in it, at least that's what I think, and the only way I could account for it was by considering Brahman to have memory. In a system with memory, incidental connections can bring an abstraction to reality, right? Once I realized that, everything from commentators curse and numens to voodoo dolls and village Gods started making sense to me. What if Gods are our ancestors, whose abstractions still persist because of incidental connections, connections to places or objects, connections strong and unbroken? Such a spirit would naturally be localized because an abstraction can only act on the predictable confines of its own village. Not seen much in cities because abstractions persist better in non-chaotic environments. In such a view, other aspects of the scriptures also becomes clear, Senor. Exact rendering of chants and prayers might bring forth these abstractions better because the power is more when the exact set of dominoes are toppled. A large number of dominoes toppled, say by years of individual effort or a full village praying together, might bring about a stronger abstraction. Do you see where this is going, Senor? The concept of reincarnation, the concept of karma, all these come out as natural consequences of the memory of Brahman. If one wants to come out of samsara, the strength of his connections with the world has to be reduced, so that the probability of the abstraction being brought back due to incidental connections is decreased. And that can be achieved by either decreasing his overall interactions, which was the earlier way, or by having so many interactions that individual connections are

weakened, or by living in a chaotic environment, which is what is happening nowadays. Don't you think there is some logic to all of this, Don Alonso?"

"What is with all this religious mumbo-jumbo, Senores?", Sancho was by now fed up, "You started with an assumption which has no bearing in reality, that we exist inside a sea of dominoes, and now you are trying to prove God's existence with it? This is unbelievable! Memory too, Adi? You know what you are getting into? You are saying that if you roll a dice, a physical dice, the chance of getting the previous result is higher than the others, that further changes tend to cluster around previous modifications. You are saying that, because of the concept of context, everything will follow the path of least effort. You think one step below, it goes even worse, Adi. Since a system with memory can have abstractions built out of other abstractions, all the way down, are you suggesting that all elementary particles are the same object deep down? You don't come up with such a theory and not expect complications, Ad"

"Not really proving the existence of God, Sancho", said Don Alonso, "What he is talking about is closer to an ancestral spirit than a God, with limited powers and range. Don't outright reject this view because your current understanding of God differs from reality, those differences arise when we anthropomorphize these abstractions, ascribe to it what we may consider as important, say, power, ethics and hierarchy, only then does these deviations start to appear. You have to realize

that it is difficult for us to understand what the original thinkers meant, with their culture and understanding of reality quite different from ours, it is upon us to ...”

Adi stopped him mid-sentence.

“I don’t think logical constructs will help, Senor. Sancho seems to be a thoroughgoing materialist, and will only be satisfied with an interpretation grounded in reality, right?”

“It would really help if there is such an explanation, yes, Ad”

“Memory, I am not sure, but as to whether our world arise from a sea of dominoes, I think there is one possible effect on reality, Sancho, if you consider how dominoes really move. Each domino triggers all its neighbors, and each of them in turn triggers all their neighbors, right? Isn’t this the exact same thing what we worry about at a microscopic level? Where each object looks like it has gone through every path before being detected? And since the swaying of the triggered domino matches that of the triggering domino, most paths gets canceled out, one swing offsetting the other, and the end result is a particle that *has* gone through every path, Sancho, flowing very much like a wave, and when toppled, acting exactly like an object.”

“That interpretation looks problematic, isn’t it?”, this was Don Alonso, “A particle cannot go through all the

paths at the same time, Ad — the implications of this are huge. What if the paths are constrained — say, there are multiple paths which are equally viable? Are you saying that the same particle will end up in all those places?”

“It is one possibility, yes. Another possibility, which I like more, is to consider that the same object is smeared over all the paths, and as such, individually, cannot topple any of the dominoes. Instead, at each point, the dominoes sway based on the probability of success of that path. Now, there are more objects passing through, each again smearing itself over all paths, each path swaying more and more, until dominoes start toppling, toppling based on the probability of success of that path. You are getting it, Senor?”

“This just ends with another set of problems, right? Instead of more particles coming to being, you now lose particles, at least a small percentage of them. Particles lost into nothingness, meshed to the fabric of reality. Don’t get me wrong, Ad, this might well be the case, this might even be the reason why particles can pop in and out of nothingness, or bigger and faster particles having stricter positions, or whatever, but in the end, none of these matter. All these are just suppositions, without any trace of experimental proof, and such an extraordinary claim cannot be made without extraordinary proof. And finding proof for this ... I think you are focusing on the wrong thing here, Ad.”

“It is not just one thing. The way time works, how space

curves, all of these can be answered by this, Senor. If time shows the speed at which the mind processes things, wouldn't that explain why time slows down when there is a concentration of interacting objects? Because the speed of processing individual objects slow down in such a cluster. The fun part is — inside such a system, an object wouldn't feel the slowness — because everything, absolutely everything, runs slow, but to an external object, this slowdown is quite visible, because that external object is not subject to the slowness of processing. Think about it, Senor. Each domino reaches the next domino at a different time because of this delay in processing. This means that path of highest probability is no longer the straight line — rather it becomes highest for a curved path, the curve increasing as the object count increases. Do you understand what I am saying? All these makes some sort of intuitive sense, Senor."

"Again, Ad, I am not saying that your idea is wrong... I am just pointing out that there are many assumptions here, which may or may not be right, I don't know. Maybe the physical effects leak down to reality, maybe it doesn't — what I am trying to say is that it really doesn't matter. Sorry, Sancho, I know I am hijacking your conversation, but I really feel Adi is going down the wrong path here. For me, his system is the only thing that matters, and I don't want him to go down this path at all, really. Don't you see — I can now believe in God, be in awe, wonder at great stories, fear spirits and apparitions — I am getting a life beyond just mine, and that's what is important in this, not whether it percolates to reality or

not. All which my skepticism has destroyed, this system is giving me back — my traditions, my ancestors, my superstitions and myths — and for me, that is the only thing that matters, A d.”

Adi went silent for some time before he spoke, “You know, Senor, I started initially with an intention of understanding Brahman, to understand the reason for our oneness with God, but somewhere along the way, my focus actually had veered away a lot. I got bogged down with details, became far too concerned with reality, and ... I need to think, Senor”

Adi got up and went out to the creek bank, his head bent in deep thought. He wasn't back until late evening, and on entering the hut, he held Don Alonso in a deep embrace, and then he answered their questions —

“I have been thinking all day about what my original goals were and where I am now, Senor. What you said, of being part of something bigger, really struck a chord in me. I realize now that to understand Brahman is not just another goal, it is one's destiny. A destiny that cannot be traversed alone. God is what we make Him, and to understand God, to reach Brahman, I have to understand life beyond just mine, and I cannot do it alone here. I am coming back with you tomorrow, Senor. Our paths then will split at Utopai, mine towards Brahman, and yours, I guess, towards fulfillment.”

Don Alonso, while quite taken aback initially, was quite

pleased with Adi's change of heart. After a few perfunctory objections, Don quickly agreed to Adi's views, and started helping him pack for the travel back. His sleep, after all these exertions, was a deep and enjoyable one, pleasant dreams showing him that at last, his journey is also nearing its end.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Stranger

If the journey to meet Ad was a panicky, dreadful affair, the journey back was anything but. Feeling safe, content and one with the nature, their trek back was a dream, taking in the sights and sounds of the jungle, sleeping in the open, counting stars and satellites, eyes wide in amazement at the majestic cloud formations and the streaking flashes of meteors — for the first time, really understanding nature and their role in it.

Don and Sancho split up with Adi at the gates of Utopai, their parting a mixed affair, sadness and anticipation, hope and anxiety. Don Alonso had a surprise waiting for him, a personal message from Carl detailing his progress, excitement bubbling over in every sentence. He has already gathered about eighty people, and his first public speech was going to happen today evening at Pangloss Hall. But Don Alonso's health check took a long time though, there was even a long quarantine — four hours! — and it was already evening when they were allowed to enter Utopai. By the time they reached the hall,

the speech was over, only a few stragglers left, some of them just mulling around, a few continuing the discussions. Seeing Don and Sancho coming in, Carl ran up to them, face beaming, eyes twinkling, and with unbridled excitement and delight, started telling them about his speech, the standing ovation, the applause, the plaudits and accolades, an absolute bundle of happiness and joy.

They sat together, to discuss about all that happened last few days, when one of the stragglers approached them. His name was Albert, friends call him Al. He had originally gone to the suicide wing of Bethlem because life felt meaningless and absurd, but Bea had asked him to come here before making his decision. He was sorry to be butting in like this, but Bea had asked him to wait until Don Alonso, Sancho and Carl started their private conversation before he was to go and meet them.

While they were initially a bit peeved at this intrusion, this explanation took them by surprise, and they asked him to join them at their table. Albert was a lean, athletic, young chap, intelligent and self-assured, interested in what they had to say, keeping quiet for the most part. While the initial exchanges were a bit awkward, mostly due to the presence of the outsider, after sometime all the stickiness melted away, and pretty soon Don Alonso and Carl were animatedly exchanging details of the last three days. The concept of expanding self, while not new to Carl, turned out to be the center point of the discussion, especially Don Alonso's interpretation of it as the solution

for everything.

“OK. Alienation will not happen in a small close-knit group because the group is an extension of the person — that is clear. In a small scale, this solution is fine. When the success of individual is the success of the group, one wouldn’t be alienated from the group, motivations will match the satisfaction, and there won’t be any grasping — all these are absolutely fine, even elegant, solving all your concerns from that day. But, Don Alonso, how are these small groups ever going to be practical in our world? Our current situation might not be ideal, but it is still light years ahead of the world we had earlier, and it is all because of the systems that we have built. Do you want to go back to the world of sickness and pain, of famine and despair, of crime and fear? Because that is what our world will look like, if we dismantle our systems and move to a world of small groups. Groups will fight each other for meager resources, lack of functioning economy will cause famine and suffering, no hospitals to look after the sick, lack of hygiene bringing forth more diseases than one can count. No, Senor, even if small societies help in fulfillment, the negatives are far too great to even consider this as an option.”

“I think I have messed up my explanation, Carl”, said Don Alonso, “What I meant was to incorporate this concept of small groups to our existing systems, not to replace any of the current structures. The only change I am suggesting is that instead of the individual, the group should become the smallest element in a society.

Obviously there will be some restructuring required, I don't deny that, but it wouldn't be as drastic as you think. The biggest complexity will be in transitioning the societal rewards and punishments from the individual to the group, and there will also be problems in maintaining the group size, like splitting and moving groups over a certain limit, to avoid the pitfalls of uncontrolled growth. If these complexities can be managed, it should work out well, I guess. See Carl, I am a person of moderation. Do you think I will come up with something extreme?"

Albert, who was quiet till now, suddenly spoke —

"Isn't this all futile, Don Alonso? Aren't these all just mechanisms to find meaning in a world where there is none? Life has no *raison d'être*, there is no special purpose — it is just another random process, like a falling rock or a blowing wind. And if there is no meaning whatsoever, what use are all these plans? We strive for success, wanting to be famous, wanting to be legends, not realizing that time is measured in billions of years, that we are insignificant atoms in a gargantuan world, that our life means nothing, that our aspirations are unrealizable. In such a world, whatever you do, people will never be happy, *Senor*. Small groups or big, this is a dream unreachable. If you can accept this fact, that life is inherently meaningless, then you can at least be free — because then it doesn't matter where you are, what rules you live under, you can come up with your own interpretation of life, it becomes your decision, you answer only to you."

“But you weren’t able to decide on an interpretation, right?”

“That I couldn’t, but it wasn’t for lack of trying, Don Alonso. I have gone through everything, from nihilism to hedonism and everything is between, but nothing felt... real. I traveled, I volunteered, I explored, I read, but nothing worked, Senor, nothing felt satisfactory, there was no meaning, and you see, I ended up at Bethlem.”

“You are not attacking the root cause here, Albert. All this Faustian striving has its roots at the concept of individuality. You are absolutely correct that there is no meaning if you look at the whole world. But that doesn’t mean you start looking at only yourselves, right? That is again another extreme which doesn’t work. And the maximum is rarely at the extremes. You reach your maximum at an optimum point in the curve, when you become one with your group. You reach your maximum when others join you, extends you, when their emotions and motivations coincide and combine with that of you. The combined motivations and emotions are beyond what you can achieve alone, the baby-fed concepts of pride, admiration, self-worth, all coming out only in a group, all which brings out the meaning in life. Don’t you see, Albert, the problem is not with the world, rather it is with your individualistic perspective, and all your solutions are required only when you start looking at the world in this light.”

“I do not understand still, Senor. Happiness and emotions might be higher in a group, but what I am searching for is meaning, not happiness. How can a group provide me that?”

“You do know that the meaning of an object is in its relations, right? That is how information gets built up in any self-contained system. A ball gets its meaning from its relation to all its aspects, its connection to bounciness and roundness, its connections with other objects, whether a glass breaks if it hits, whether we can catch it, all of these. You are no different, you are in the end a block of information, and the meaning of your life is in your relations with others. If you have a close group you are deeply connected to, this meaning comes out strong and explicit. But if you don’t have such a group, you then start finding meaning in your job, country, maybe God, because these are what you now have connections to. These are tenuous relations though, and unless you are deeply passionate, these connections wouldn’t give you a real meaning, wouldn’t feel satisfactory enough. Now you see why individualistic perspective is such a problem, Albert? Why I am so much against it? It robs you of your meaning in life, that’s why. It makes you miserable without you knowing it. And the problems doesn’t stop there. God and country are long-lasting systems, living on for centuries or eons, so the meanings gleaned from these connections also span the same amount of time — you want your name to be remembered for centuries, or live in heaven forever. We can’t understand two generations, Albert, how can we understand centuries, let alone

forever? You get it now? You won't find any meaning if you look at the whole world. Your meaning is only in your relations, that's what gives your life purpose, and the stronger your relations are, the more profound you will find your life to be. Your problem has been with your individualism, Albert. Without a small, close group to which you are deeply connected to, you will be hard pressed to find meaning in life."

"Oh! Meaning is in relations ... Now I understand what you were saying, Senor. Why we find meaning in a small group — our connections there are strong and many, so in a really fundamental way, it does bring meaning, yes. The only sadness is that, I wanted to be something more than a process, more than a falling ball or a clinging moss, and now it looks like there is no difference... This is somewhat bittersweet, Senor. I understood meaning, but looks like it was at the expense of soul and free will."

"Why do you think this way, Albert? We are a process, no doubt. That doesn't mean we don't have identity or free will. I can make value judgments based on my personality and beliefs. I can pit my valuations of different aspects against one another. I can make logical calculations in my mind, based on my personality, knowledge and relationships. I come up a solution after considering all these, a solution which I think is optimum at that point of time. Isn't this what you consider as free will? Just because a calculator is made of atoms doesn't make the calculations any less worthy, does it?"

“I understand all that, Senor. But, when you are just a fixed process where you cannot change anything in the future, how do you consider yourself as free? Given one scenario, if you always have to do the same thing, then it is not free will, right? And if you cannot change anything, how can you be held responsible for your actions? How can a court put you in jail? Do you see what I am driving at, Senor?”

“I am not sure, Albert. In my view, for any scenario, there is only a single solution. We don’t see it that way because we are not looking at it deep enough. No one makes a decision in isolation — your environment, personality, mood, everything comes to play in that decision. If you are lifting some object, your decision to ask for help will depend on how your society views asking for help, how shy a person you are, whether you are tired, whether the item is heavy, a lot of things. If you are considering every single parameter, you always end up with a single solution. Given the exact same scenario, you cannot choose a different decision, Albert. It makes no sense conceptually. Wanting to choose a different decision is like wanting a different personality or wanting a different society — at that point of time, impossible.”

“Agreed — but in the end, it does mean that there is no free will, Senor. If there is only one solution, and if I am compelled to take it, isn’t that pretty much the opposite of free will?”

“There is only one solution because your mind

calculates and comes up with that solution, Albert, because your personality, identity, knowledge, all comes together to decide upon the path to follow. How is that not free will? What did you want otherwise? Your mind cannot give you multiple choices — it can only give you one, and that is the one you pick. If your concept of free will is that you should be able to choose between multiple options inside your mind, that's what you are doing anyways. Any decision you make is comparison of different options, where you choose the best solution based on who you are and what your circumstances are. By any objective measure, you do have free will, Albert. Now, if are saying that your mind itself is shaped by factors outside your control, that's an altogether different discussion, separate from this question of free will. You are who you are because of your circumstances — it is a known thing, Albert. People from similar backgrounds tend to have similar behaviors, and if we can include every single external factor in our analysis, we would exactly know what one thinks, how one reacts, every single aspect. If you were born rich, or lost your hand, whether you had brothers, or you grew alone, all these circumstances dictate your choice, color your current and future behavior — it really has nothing to do with free will, Albert”.

“Still, Senor, I should not be held responsible for my actions if that is the only action available at that point, right?”

“You are confusing cause and effect here, Al. A court

puts you in jail so that when people make similar decisions in the future, they will have this consideration also in the mind. There is absolutely nothing more to it. Everything else, responsibility, revenge, justice, all of these are just heuristics to make things easier to process. You are held responsible for your actions because your actions came out of you, came out of calculations in your mind. It is done so that the next time anyone faces such a scenario, they see that they will be held responsible, they see the repercussions, and their calculations in the mind then might give out a different result. Your personality is shaped by these societal constructs, and you, your society, and these constructs all get their meaning from these circular relations, Albert."

"Oh! It is still a bit hazy, but I am getting it now, Senor. Only problem I see is that, if justice is purely a mechanism to avoid future scenarios, then wouldn't action matter more than intent? Is that fair?"

"Both are important, Albert. If we punish intent, people will think twice before doing something on purpose. If we punish action, we would prepare more to avoid accidents. Obviously, there are degrees to everything. If the accident is something which no preparation could have avoided, then there is no reason to punish it, since it is not going to avoid any future scenario. It is probability which drives this, Al, the higher the probability, the more it comes under judicial scrutiny."

"Senor, this is amazing!", this was Sancho, his eyes

bright and twinkling, “Only now I understand what you were saying yesterday. These groups... How big are they? Family or something bigger?”

“Family would be too small, Sancho. A life feels more satisfactory when there are connections in every direction — not only does it avoid over-stimulation of few paths, it also removes frustrations of unexplored areas. More importantly, a system with many connections, some strong, many weak, feels more meaningful, feels more profound, new patterns coming to front, unknown connections forming automatically, making life a more intense, a more meaningful experience. A family sized group cannot provide all that — it is too small, too risky, the effect of a loss too big, a death in the family causing heartbreak and extreme sadness, because the connections are too strong, because the meaning is limited to very few, because there are no other connections to support and supplant. Actually, Sancho, the answer to suffering is not to remove connections and desires, rather, it is to have enough and varied close connections so as to bring a deep, spread out and intense meaning to your life, a life so full that a loss of meaning in one side can be overcome by the meaning remaining.”

“But, Senor, too big a group causes alienation, right?”

“Yes, Sancho, and that again decreases the meaning. It has to be an optimum value in the middle, I don’t know, fifteen to thirty, maybe. Moreover, the group has to be equal, respect unrelated to power, ethics and relations as

important as everything else, because only such a system will allow the individual to become one with the group, because it will respond and react to everyones needs, the group extending to the individual, the individual extending to the group, a system ripe for fulfillment, Sancho."

"I love this, Senor! You got it, Al? What you were trying to do, reading, traveling, exploring, volunteering, it was also a way to bring connections in every direction — to increase meaning in your life. Only that these new connections aren't very strong, so the meanings also wouldn't be very strong — that's why you ended up thinking your life as worthless. As Senor Alonso said, you need a close group to bring about strong connections, to give your life meaning — then you wouldn't be so unhappy. You do see what I am saying, right? You were doing the same thing what we are discussing here, just that you weren't aware of it."

"This doesn't look fully consistent, Sancho.", Albert by now had lost the feeling of being a third wheel, "Small groups and exploration doesn't go together, in my view. If I explore more, my strong connections will start dying off, but if I don't explore, I don't get the happiness of varied connections. Not only that, without varied connections, my connections become overused and brings in less happiness. There is a whole lot of contradictions here, right?"

"Not exactly contradictions, Albert.", said Don Alonso,

“Just different forces pulling from different directions, that’s all. And the solution, as usual, is somewhere down the middle. An optimum point where you get the maximum out of all the different forces. Isn’t it this way everywhere, Al? The best is when we enjoy and appreciate both sides of a coin, everywhere, the high art and the low brow, sciences and the occult, physicality and tenderness, awe and irreverence, understand and explore all sides, decide on the optimum point where you get the maximum out of everything, based on your priorities and motivations. Consider this as one area where you have to find your own sweet spot, Albert.”

“I don’t know — I see other areas where we still have these problems, areas where there is no sweet spot to fall back on, Senor. What about our baser desires, pride, greed, jealousy, all the emotions and traits that we sweep under the carpet? We cannot allow space to indulge in them, because it is a slippery slope, it will end up taking over the whole person, increasing his alienation from the society. And suppressing it wouldn’t work either, because, like any other system based on negation, it is computationally suboptimal, and thus, inherently unstable. When one knows that there is a big reservoir of happiness beyond a hill, who wouldn’t try to tunnel through it? And the danger is not just the underhand methods used by us, Senor. Status symbols and hatchet jobs are just a symptom of the real danger, that when things start going bad in the society, when the negation by cultural propriety takes on a lower value, all these suppressed traits will come out, decreasing the value of

cultural propriety still further, a feedback cycle rending the very fabric of society. These are dangerous problems, Senor. When things are not hunky dory, when our society needs us the most, such an unstable system fails the society completely. Not only does such a system fail the person, in leaving their life unfulfilled, it also fails the society itself in the long run.”

“What if we stop the baser characteristics from even taking shape, Albert?”, this was Sancho, “If we can avoid pride or greed from ever forming, through ethics and training, then there is no problem right?”

“It wouldn’t work, Sancho”, Carl now joined in, “When your mother praises you for doing good, she is not just instilling good behavior in you. She is also bringing in the concept of self-worth, the concept of pride, the concept of happiness at the groups approval. This is why pride makes you happy, why you cannot stop it from forming, why you cannot remove it from the psyche. Whatever societal control you use, these dominoes will trigger every time in every social situation, always lurking in the back of your mind, something which you absolutely know you want, but then suppress due to negativeness of cultural propriety. The roots go deep into our very nature, and is one of the reasons why we love success, money and achievements. Albert does have a point here, Sancho.”

“He has a point, yes, but that is because he is not looking at the group as a real extension of himself, Carl.”, said Don Alonso, “When we become one with the group,

there wouldn't be any belittling, jealousy or snobbishness, not because of cultural propriety, rather because that would be against the concept of equality, relations and respect within the group. You really have to understand what group extending you means, Albert. You will not see yourself as separate from others. Your only base desires then will be for your group, being proud for the group or greedy for the group, all of which are directed outwards, never inward. Cultural propriety there is to help become one with the group, a common set of traditions and ethics to bring about common mindsets and motivations, the deep rooted system which Carl was suggesting. Such a system will not fail the group, Albert, neither would it fail the person."

There was a brief interlude then — dinner was announced, and there was no chance for any discussions after that, so famished were Sancho and Don Alonso after the meager fare over the last few days. It was a banquet fit for a king, with multiple courses and brilliant desserts, and not a sound came out from all of them until it was all over.

It was time then for the post-meal walk, under the moonlight, amidst the sleeping swans and rabbits, the whole area fragrant with the smell of azucenas, azucenas opening up and bowing their heads as if to welcome them, all walking silently, mind buzzing with all these new information, all trying to forget and enjoy nature, enjoy the last few days of absolute peace and serenity, sad and hopeful, worried and excited.

It was Albert who broke the silence with an abstract question.

“Don Alonso”, said he, “Whatever Adi said about the makeup of the world, I don’t know..., do you really believe it? I had a rather solipsistic view — that maybe the world itself doesn’t exist, maybe the whole thing is a figment of my imagination, maybe it is an entity, a spirit, or an evil genius, putting thoughts in my head. When the only thing I can be sure of is *my* mind and *my* existence, there is no surety on anything else, right? Everything else, you, Sancho, the ground we walk on, even my body, there is no way I can be sure of any of their existence. Adi, for me, is far and away from this, Senor.”

“I used to worry about the same thing earlier, Albert.”, said Don Alonso, “But when I understood that there are limits to any power, my views started to change. You see, there is no way an entity can deceive you completely — it wouldn’t have the capability to do so. And on the same lines, there is no way the whole world is a figment of your imagination — *you* also don’t have the capability to do so. The world is far too complex for any of this to happen. If that entity is trying to make me feel that I am interacting with the world, it will have to manufacture reactions that are consistent not just with me, but also with the surroundings, and for all time. And it is absolutely difficult, because every interaction changes the whole world, a ball kicked or a fly shooed, over time, can change everything. Each reaction of the others have to thus

consider every single instance before and every element around — there is no easy way out — these are hard problems without quick solutions, AI. With a thousand elements and a few seconds, you end up with more possibilities than what a computer the size of our universe can calculate, let alone consider every element in the universe for billions of years. Do you understand, Albert? No entity, genius or otherwise, can deceive you completely. It has to be real, not a figment of your imagination.”

“Wouldn’t patterns help?”

“Patterns are quicker in making decisions, yes, but they are lossy. Over time these losses add up, and you end up with an answer completely different from reality. Actually, one reason I think the whole thing is real is the accuracy of answers in reality. It cannot be this accurate otherwise, Albert.”

“There is one way we can still be deceived, Señor. If the entity allows each object to interact independently — rather than calculating the results for it — then wouldn’t we still feel everything to be accurate and real, and still be deceived?”

“When every object interacts with other objects in the universe independently, when every bit of information available in the universe is used to make decisions, you do end up with the whole universe itself, Albert. To store the information available in the whole universe requires a

space as vast as our current universe. When each object interacts independently without our knowledge, from a dust mote to a person, when every person has their own private thoughts and minds, what is it but our material universe, Albert? Now, is it my mind which runs the whole thing? For that my mind has to be as big as the whole universe, Albert. Even otherwise, since the reaction of others to my body and actions are similar to their reactions to other objects, it stands to reason that I am a separate object, similar to every other object in the universe. Do you understand, Albert? Not only am I a separate object as far as the interacting system is concerned, it is also not possible for it to perceive it differently from my understanding. If others perceive me as having five hands while I perceive myself as having only two, the reactions and interactions will be wholly inconsistent, causing the result to diverge from reality over time, messing up the whole system. Now, it doesn't mean that an entity can never intervene in our affairs — to change our circumstances for benefit or loss. It can happen, patterns can be of help here, but there can be no surety the effect will be as expected — the complexity is far too much for that."

"No wonder Gods stopped helping us once we moved from villages to cities, Senor. Anyways, I never thought about the accuracy part, actually. It pretty much pours cold water into my theory, I guess. Moreover this accuracy means the luck factor can also be ruled out, right? The probability of everything being just a lucky thought in my head now looks impossible, since to be this

accurate, time after time, the probability of that looks far lower than the chance that the system is real. I concur, Senor, the world really does look real now.”

“Let us not start this again...”, said Sancho, “When we are thinking about how to move to a new system, how to move away from Utopai, such an important thing for all of us — why are we discussing whether world exists or not? There are so many other things to consider — I still haven’t completely understood your concept of groups, so let us not talk about God and Brahman again, Senor.”

“OK...OK, Sancho”, said Don Alonso, laughing, “What else is there to understand about the group? I thought everything was clear, right?”

“Not completely, Senor”, said Sancho, “This society becoming an extension of us — does that really happen? I had a brother whom I lived with for the first fifteen years, and I was never really close to him. If anything, it was fifteen years of sibling rivalry. Can I really extend to my society when even my brother is a stranger to me?”

“Again, the culprit is our individualist society, Sancho, because your interests and your brother’s interests go in different directions in such a system, and that is the reason for this alienation. Actually, you might feel more closely connected to your friends than to your brother, because friends usually have similar interests. In a close-knit group, the motivations and interests of both you and your brother will match, and you will see both of your selves

merged, one extending the other. To tell you the truth, this concept of two kids per family is another one which causes problems, Sancho. It provides the least amount of permanent connections, and is thus the most difficult to achieve a fulfilled life. My preference is four kids in one generation, a single child each in the next, going to four again and so on and so forth. With four kids, they form a group, have a jolly childhood, one of mischief and vigor, love and fun, helping each other through thick and thin. And in old age, they will be the most content, sitting around the table gossiping, guffawing, enjoying each others company. The next generation, as single children, enjoy the other side of life, a life of privilege and pampering, being the center of attention, with close relations with parents, as much as eight aunts and uncles providing love and support, a lot of cousins to play with, again a life more content. Both should be there, four kids again and again makes the family too big, the connections losing strength, single kid again and again means no connections at all, just your immediate family, the best is this mix of four and one, Sancho."

"The more I think about it, the more I am convinced that a fundamental rethinking is required everywhere, Don Alonso", this was Albert, "Strong connections bring a new set of issues, right? When everyone is strongly connected to each other, wouldn't incompatibilities start grating? This can be handled within a group, but when people move from one group to another, say, during marriage, wouldn't these incompatibilities become problematic? To a level where it can even tear the whole

group apart? Think about the person coming in to the group, Senor. When the connections are this strong with the previous group, breaking those connections and coming to another group will destroy the meaning of that persons life completely. Incompatibility to the new group means new connections are difficult to form — other than to the spouse and children, and now, the whole meaning of life gets built up from these new connections. This is not optimal, Don Alonso, because these connections to spouse and children can become extraordinarily strong, so strong that it can tear them away from the group itself. Strong connections usually are reciprocated, world view of spouse and children also changes, they become alienated from the group, the group itself self-destructs. Not only is it bad for the group, it is even bad for the individual, since all other connections, present and future, by spouse, by children, has to struggle against this strong connection, decreasing meaning in others lives, ultimately affecting the individual itself. Within a group we might be able to iron out incompatibilities through ethics and education, but across groups, these are fundamental issues which cannot be resolved, Don Alonso.”

“Your point is valid, but I think there is a solution, Albert. What if the person coming in creates connections similar to the broken ones — as in, very close relations with everyone in the new group, with similar freedom and openness like back home. Wouldn’t this regrow broken connections? If so, wouldn’t this stop the alienation at the source itself? I guess this is what child marriages and marriages within the extended family were trying to

achieve, albeit in a roundabout way. The difference here is that the group is equal, so, it has to be a concentrated effort from all four parties knowing that this is the only way for the group to survive. It is not easy, requires real effort, but it is possible, Albert.”

“How can new connections form so easily, Senor? Even if both groups have similar backgrounds, there will be hidden incompatibilities, many of them strong enough to stop the formation of new connections. And these problems aren’t only for the group where one is going to. Even in the group from where the person is breaking away, since the group and the person knows that they will break away sometime, the original connections will be weaker than otherwise. And when the connections are weak, such a person can become individualistic, focusing on individual needs at the detriment of the group. There will also be this pervading feeling of insecurity, of going to a new group, knowing that there the focus will be on individual characteristics, and that can increase ones estrangement a lot. The person will become alienated more and more, this fear and disaffection manifesting as jealousy and resentment, and with individualization, alienation and weaker connections feeding into each other, the end result is detrimental to everyone involved, including the group where one is going to. In the new group, this individualization only increases, undermining the foundation of the group itself, children learning from their parents, the group identity itself coming under attack. This is a fundamental problem, Don Alonso. It cannot be solved just because the new group is more open,

no way. You have to accept, Senor, that marriage, as we know it, is incompatible with collectivism. Without marriage defined differently, it wouldn't work out. If husband and wife living together is the problem, maybe the solution is that they stay at their individual groups. If the focus on the individual is causing alienation, maybe the marriage should be arranged by elders. If focus on external characteristics is causing fear and resentment, maybe the solution is to look only at ethics and openness. You see what I am reaching at, Senor? Without fundamental rethinking of the concept of marriage, you wouldn't be able to reconcile it with your concept of deep collectivism."

"I don't know, Albert. This a major change, and the long term consequences, I don't know..."

"The consequences shouldn't be very negative, Don Alonso, there is a consistency to it all which should help. Anyways, there is no other option, right? Otherwise, you have to ditch collectivism altogether. Instead, embrace individualism completely. Where you don't care about the social positives, as long as the social negatives are removed. You won't be in absolute bliss, but at least you will be at peace. Live a life where you are cut off from everything, an inanimate society taking care of you and your family. Living completely alone, with only tenuous connections with everything else, no irritations, no barbs, trying to find happiness in things done in isolation, a different way of life. You wouldn't find meaning in life, and there wouldn't be any deep fulfillment, but it will be

much better than a close-knit society gone bad, because there the societal negatives will far outweigh the positives. You have to choose between them, Don Alonso, there is no other go."

"Don't be hard on Don Alonso, Albert", this was Carl, "He is just concerned about something so radical, that's all. And it is not just these two options, right? Between these two, there are many, many others which can be tried out. Some may fail, many will not. Maybe self-consistency is the key, or maybe it is ethics and openness, or it could be something else altogether. The point is to try out, Albert, to know that we can fail, and still try out."

Nobody spoke after this, the debate was over, an expectant hush signaling Carl to take on the mantle, all looks now directed at him. He stood up, face flushed, arms stretched out, as if he was embracing the whole world, and said —

"Can you come with us, Don Alonso? We will build it as you and Albert are suggesting, a deeply collective system, a system primed for fulfillment, we will see whether it will work out. What if there are issues? We now know enough to understand why things fall apart, enough to come up with better and better systems. In the end, Senores, we will reach the perfect solution. We will end up with what we are all looking for, a system of absolute fulfillment, not for few, but for all, a system of deep satisfaction and joy, a system where a common man can achieve nirvana. Come, Albert, come, Sancho, and do

come, Don Alonso, let's see whether we can make our lives worth living."

They all stood up to return the embrace, and that, my dear reader, is my cue to stop this narration. I can only wish them good luck, and to you too, dear reader, and now, I bid you adieu.